

# An American Empire?



The words sound strange on American lips, yet especially since the lightning U.S. victory in Afghanistan, they've been spoken with increasing frequency—and not only as an indictment. Other concepts—*superpower*, *hegemon*, *hyperpower*—seem inadequate to describing America's position today. Does *empire* fill the bill?

We put the question to a group of distinguished thinkers: How should we conceive of America's role in the world? Is America really an empire? And should it resist or embrace an imperial identity?

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# What Kind of Empire?

by Martin Walker

In the month before the Berlin Wall came down in 1989, I found myself attending a conference at Moscow's Oktyabrskaya Hotel with the Polish Solidarity activist and writer Adam Michnik. Traditionally the preserve of the Communist Party elite, the hotel had one feature that stunned Adam and me, two veterans of the Soviet experience. It was the first place we had ever found the elusive Zubnaya Pasta, the Soviet-made toothpaste that was reputed to exist but was seldom seen by either foreigners or ordinary Russians. Small tubes of the stuff had been placed in each hotel room, along with shampoo that smelled like paint stripper, bottles of mineral water and vodka, and boxes of tissues that were clearly designed to complete the paint-stripping job started by the shampoo. The evidence of privileged Soviet plenty, to be found exclusively in a hotel usually reserved for visiting party chieftains, and the loss of imperial nerve symbolized by our welcome into these once-forbidden precincts, inspired Adam to muse on the imminent fall of the third Rome.

It had long been a conceit of Russian nationalists and Slavophiles that after the fall of the first Rome to the barbarians in the fifth century A.D., and of the second Rome, Constantinople, to the Ottomans in 1453, Moscow was to be the heart of the third terrestrially sovereign Roman Empire. Now this third Rome was visibly falling, Adam noted, even as he hailed the emergence, far to the west, of a new Caesar who had summoned into existence a fourth Rome. *Arma virumque cano*, Adam declaimed, and dedicated to the newly retired president Ronald Reagan and his rearmament program those opening words of the *Aeneid*: "I sing of arms and the man."

Warming to the theme, we noted the similarities of Roman law and American lawyers. We remarked on the parallels between a Roman and an American culture that were robust and populist, though each was curiously deferential to an earlier elitist style—of ancient Greece in the one case and modern Europe in the other. We spoke of Roman roads and American interstate highways, the importance of Latin and modern English in disseminating their respective open and inclusive cultures, and the relative ease of acquir-





*Britain's Imperial Viceroy ruled the Indian subcontinent with great pomp and a handful of administrators. He and his wife mark Edward VII's 1903 accession as King of England and Emperor of India.*

ing old Roman or modern American citizenship. We even invoked the two cultures' common obsession with central heating and plumbing.

Some months later, with due acknowledgment to Adam, I published an essay that pursued the parallels between ancient Rome and America, the last remaining superpower; I returned to the theme subsequently in a book, *The Cold War: A History* (1993). The case for the analogy is easily stated. The U.S. military dominates the globe through 200 overseas bases, a dozen aircraft carrier task forces, and a unique mastery of the new high technology of intelligent warfare. This universal presence is buttressed by the world's richest and most technologically advanced economy, which itself dominates global communications and the world's financial markets, their main institutions based—and their rules drafted—in Washington and New York.

The United States also attracts, trains, and commands a predominant share of the world's intellectual talent, through an array of outstanding graduate schools and institutes of advanced learning and research. Only three non-

American universities—Oxford, Cambridge, and London—seriously qualify for any list of the world’s top 20 academic institutions, and thanks to the language, Americans feel at home at all three. Further, the United States has established a unique cultural predominance, not just through the quality of its free principles and constitution but through the seductive power of its entertainments and fashions, from movies to blue jeans to gangsta rap. Never before has there been anything quite like this American domination of the world. Even Rome had always to keep a wary eye on the Parthians and Persians, and one or two of its legions might at any time be swallowed without a trace by the barbarians of the Teutoberger Wald.

The new-Rome analogy that began as a journalist’s flippant conceit more than a decade ago has flourished into a cliché, and I’m now feeling a degree of remorse. The comparison is as glib as it is plausible, and there has always been something fundamentally unsatisfactory about it. Of course it’s possible to see the broad resemblances to contemporary America in the policies of the ancient state. Rome established authority by exercising power. It then spread and maintained the authority through a kind of consent that took root in the widening prosperity of a pan-Mediterranean trading network sustained by Rome’s naval strength, in a tolerable system of law and order, and in the seductive infiltration of Rome’s language and culture.

But the United States does not rule, and it shrinks from mastery. When, for example, in the early 1990s the government of the Philippines requested the return of Clark Air Base and the Subic Bay Naval Station, the American legions calmly folded their tents and stole away. Even important strategic assets, such as the Panama Canal, have been freely bestowed by amicable treaty. American presidents are not the victors of civil wars, nor are they acclaimed to the purple by the Praetorian Guard. They are elected (though we had best pass hastily over the parallel between the fundraising obligations of modern campaigns and the oblations of gold that secured the loyalty of the Roman legions). Moreover, America has a reasonable and accepted system for managing the succession and the institutionalized rejuvenation of power. The president, elected for a specific term, is no emperor; he is a magistrate who administers laws that he is not empowered to enact. His powers are checked and supervised by an elected legislature and restrained by courts. Above all, he does not command the power to declare war.

**R**ome’s empire was the real thing, held down by brutal force and occupation, at least until the benefits of law and order, trade, and cultural assimilation reconciled colonized peoples to their new status. It was a single geographic block, as classical empires usually were, its frontiers garrisoned and its limits set by the reach and pace of marching troops and the organizing skills that ensured that imperial armies could be paid and fed. Rome was at constant war with barbarians on the

>MARTIN WALKER, a former Wilson Center Public Policy Scholar, is a journalist and the author of *America Reborn: A Twentieth-Century Narrative in Twenty-Six Lives* (2000) and other books. His latest book is *The Caves of Périgord* (2002), a novel. Copyright © 2002 by Martin Walker.

northern front and with the all-too-civilized Persians to the east. It had no allies, only satellites and client states that were required to reward their protectors with the tribute that symbolized dependence. And Rome showed no magnanimity to its defeated enemies; it organized no Marshall Plans or International Monetary Fund bailouts to help them recover and join the ranks of the civilized world. Carthage was destroyed and salt plowed into its fields to render them forever barren. Of his fellow Romans' approach to pacification, the historian Tacitus said, "They make a wasteland and call it peace."

The historically flawed identification of America with Rome, which has now entered the language and the thinking of senior aides in the White House and the State Department, can foster some dangerously misleading habits of mind.

European friends complain of an alarming tendency of the United States to act alone and treat allies with disdain. In 2001, French foreign minister Hubert Védrine, who coined the

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term *hyperpuissance* (hyperpower) to define America's current preeminence, told a seminar of senior French diplomats in Paris that France would "pursue our efforts toward a humane and controlled globalization, even if the new high-handed American unilateralism doesn't help matters." Chris Patten, the European Union's external affairs commissioner, has complained that the success of the United States in Afghanistan "has perhaps reinforced some dangerous instincts: that the projection of military power is the only basis of security; that the United States can rely on no one but itself; and that allies may be useful as an optional extra."

The troubling habits of mind are not simply a consequence of the attacks of September 11, or even of the arrival of the current Bush administration. Triumphant rhetoric characterized the United States during the Clinton years as, in Secretary of State Madeleine Albright's arresting phrase, "the indispensable nation," endowed with the capacity "to see further" than lesser powers. But the Clinton administration believed in collective international action. The Bush team, by contrast, applauded the refusal of the Republican-controlled Congress to ratify the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty or accept American adherence to the procedures of an international criminal court. The same Congress demanded a reduction in America's dues to the United Nations and held back payments until the country got its way. America's friends were outraged that the nation gave priority to domestic political interests. They thought less of America because they expected so much more of America: They presumed that the United States would keep its global responsibilities paramount and be governed always by Thomas Jefferson's "decent respect for the opinions of mankind." But such was not the disposition of the



*The Roman empire continued to grow long after Julius Caesar's landmark victory over the Gallic leader Vercingetorix in 52 B.C., but Rome's republican government soon crumbled.*

Washington where the Roman analogy had encouraged a frankly imperial ambition.

**B**ut can there be an American empire without an emperor? Indeed, how great a sprawl of meaning can the term empire usefully sustain—when it is already overburdened by having to encompass the vast differences among the Macedonian, Carthaginian, Roman, Persian, Ottoman, Carolingian, Mongol, Incan, Mogul, British, and Russian variants, to name but a few? Just as every unhappy family is, for Tolstoy, unhappy after its own fashion, so every empire is imperial in its own distinctive way. There are land empires and oceanic empires. There are empires such as the Ottoman, based on a common religious faith, and there are religiously tolerant, pagan, or even largely secular empires, such as Rome became in its grandest centuries. There are short-lived empires, based, like that of Alexander the Great, upon raw military power. And there are empires that thrive for centuries, usually because, like Rome and Carthage, they achieve a commercial prosperity that can enlist the allegiance of far-flung economic elites, or because they establish a professional civil service, an imperial governing class.

Such bureaucracies, whether the mandarinat of China or the Indian



Civil Service or the staff of the Vatican, have much to offer. They embody the prospect of predictable if not reasonable governance, some form of justice, the stability that allows trade to flourish, and, above all, the likelihood of continuity. Although Germany and Japan after 1945 enjoyed a fleeting exercise of administrative benefits by the occupying U.S. forces, Washington has bred and trained no imperial bureaucracy. Successive presidents have preferred to swallow the embarrassment of having South American dictatorships and feudal sheikdoms as allies rather than be accused of meddling in the affairs of other nations. This squeamishness about interfering with other governments is a telling instance of the difference between the United States and classic empires.

In its current more-than-imperial reach and quasi-imperial authority, the United States is very different from the real empire of Rome, and slightly different from the British Empire. Imagine a gauge of imperial character on which Rome scores 10. Britain might then score between 4 and 8, depending on the temporal and geographic circumstances of the measurement. Various characteristics of the United States in 2002 would score between 2 and 7: high numbers for its military power, commercial dominance, and cultural influence; low for the extent of its rule and for its preferring free allies to client states.

The British Empire seems to have more in common with contemporary America (beyond the importance of their shared language, legal systems, and naval traditions) than either of the two has with classical Rome. The matter is complicated because there were two British Empires, and the differences between them must be understood before any attempt is made to define what is and is not imperial about America's current hegemony. The first British Empire, which ended with the loss of half the North American colonies, was frankly mercantilist. The second, which was accumulated in fits and starts, was far more imperial in style and governance. But it was already being dismantled when it achieved its greatest extent, after the First World War (the League of Nations granted Britain the mandate to run the former German colonies in Africa and to be principal custodian of what had been the Ottoman Empire).

This second British Empire was always controversial. In 1877, the past and future Liberal prime minister William Gladstone claimed that it drained the economy and managed "to compromise British character in the judgment of the impartial world." Queen Victoria bridled at the "overbearing and offensive behavior" of the Indian Civil Service in "trying to trample on the people and continually reminding them and making them feel that they are a conquered people." Historians still pick their way through the varied motivations behind the empire: missionary zeal and commercial greed, high strategic concerns and low political ambitions, an honest faith in human improvement and a determination to force China to import Indian opium. As Cambridge University histo-

## The Unilateralist Way

The “axis of evil” caused a sensation around the world because it established a new American foreign policy based on three distinctive principles: morality, preemption, and unilateralism.

Our sophisticated European cousins are aghast. The French led the way, denouncing American *simplisme*. They deem it a breach of manners to call evil by its name. They prefer accommodating to it. They have lots of practice, famously accommodating Nazi Germany in 1940, less famously striking the Gaullist pose of triangulating between the Evil Empire and primitive Yanks during the Cold War.

The Europeans are not too happy with preemption either. Preemption is the most extreme form of activity, of energy, in foreign policy—anathema to a superannuated continent entirely self-absorbed in its own internal integration. (Hence the paralysis even in the face of fire in its own Balkan backyard.) The Europeans hate preemption all the more because it means America acting on its own. And it is our unilateralism above all that sticks in their craw.

Tough luck. A policy of waiting to be attacked with nuclear (and other genocidal) weapons is suicidal. Moreover, self-defense is the self-evident justification for unilateralism. When under attack, no country is obligated to collect permission slips from allies to strike back. And there is no clearer case of a war of self-defense than America’s war on terrorists and allied states for whom “death to America” is not just a slogan but a policy. . . .

When the Bush administration came to power advertising its willingness to go it alone when necessary, the Democrats were apoplectic. Early last year, for example, when George W. Bush made it clear he would be junking the ABM Treaty, Senator Carl Levin, now chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee and thus a man who should know about these things, declared: “I have great concerns about [such] a unilateral decision . . . because I believe that it could risk a second Cold War.”

Wrong. Totally wrong. In fact, when Bush did abrogate the ABM Treaty, the Russian response was almost inaudible. Those who’d been bloviating about the diplomatic dangers of such a unilateral decision noted quizzically the lack of reaction. Up in arms over the axis of evil—“it will take years before we can repair the damage done by that statement,” said former president Jimmy Carter—they are warning once again about how the world will rise against us. Wrong again.

Our enemies have already turned against us. Our allies will not. Europe knows that in the end, its security depends on our strength and our protection.

rian J. R. Seeley observed in 1883, “We seem to have conquered and peopled half the world in a fit of absence of mind.”

For the seafaring British, the imperial project began as a commercial venture: North America was explored, exploited, and turned into a profitable enterprise by the Hudson’s Bay Company. But Britain came relatively late to formal rule over its far-flung possessions. The first empire—a strange mix of crown lands, semifeudal estates, free ports, penal colonies, and vast tracts for religious dissidents—was forced by the requirements of war with the French and the Indians to adopt a formal sys-



Europeans are the ultimate free riders on American power. We maintain the stability of international commerce, the freedom of the seas, the flow of oil, regional balances of power (in the Pacific Rim, South Asia, the Middle East). and, ultimately, we provide protection against potentially rising hostile super-powers.

The Europeans sit and pout. What else can they do? The ostensible complaint is American primitivism. The real problem is their irrelevance. . . .

The Afghan war, conducted without them, highlighted how America's 21st-century high-tech military made their militaries as obsolete as were the battleships of the 19th century upon the launching of Britain's *Dreadnought* in 1906.

This is not our fault. The United States did not force upon them military obsolescence. They chose social spending over defense spending—an understandable choice, perhaps even wise given that America was willing to pick up the slack. But hardly grounds for whining.

We are in a war of self-defense. It is also a war for Western civilization. If the Europeans refuse to see themselves as part of this struggle, fine. If they wish to abdicate, fine. We will let them hold our coats, but not tie our hands.

—Charles Krauthammer

*Charles Krauthammer is a nationally syndicated columnist. This essay originally appeared on March 1, 2002.*



*In 1904, Joseph Keppler showed the eagle of American imperialism stretching from Puerto Rico to the Philippines.*

tem of rule. This empire came to an end at Yorktown in 1781 largely because London belatedly wanted to tax the colonists as if they really were subjects of the Crown.

Britain's nonrule of India continued for 75 years after its first empire crumbled at Yorktown. India was conquered, pillaged, and increasingly ruled by the Honorable East India Company, which was an independent commercial operation until 1773, when the Crown assumed partial control after financial disappointments. As Adam Smith noted in his *Wealth of Nations*, "Under the present system of management Great Britain derives

nothing but loss from the dominion which she assumes over her colonies." The Indian Mutiny of 1856 revealed the limitations of this system, and the Crown then took over, not entirely willingly, a going financial concern. Lord Palmerston, then the prime minister, defined British ambitions as "trade without rule where possible, trade with rule where necessary." Rule was expensive, cumbersome, and problematic, and equivalent commercial benefits could be obtained far more cheaply. A British subject at the head of Chinese customs, for example, might favor British interests and discourage rivals, without the unnecessary expense of a British garrison.

Britain exercised a similarly oblique sway in the Middle East. After defaulting on loans and being visited by a French and British fleet in 1876, Egypt accepted the installation of Anglo-French controllers over its national

finances. Although the powers of the British grew, and the French were squeezed out, the Egyptian monarchy, government, and army all remained in place. That proved a model for British influence throughout the Persian Gulf. Advisers at the sheikh's right hand held the trump card of a British fleet offshore. In parts of the world where there was little to attract British colonists and a reasonably effective local government was in place, the British preferred to rule through that government. Where there was no

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such local government to co-opt, as appeared to be the case in much of Africa, the British installed full imperial rule, through their own law courts, schools, and district governors. The Islamic world proved far more resistant to British sway than did either Africa or Asia because the Christian missionaries, whose schools engaged in a subtle indoctrination, were made most unwelcome.

Reluctant to finance the large standing armies characteristic of the Continental great powers, the British cultivated an oceanic enterprise through trade and their excellent Royal Navy. They avoided the trap that snared many land empires, which overextended themselves and had to defend ever-wider frontiers. Sea power allowed the British Empire to rule by something very close to bluff. Until the South African War (1899–1902) and the demands of the trenches of the First World War, there were never more than 150,000 troops in the entire British Army—a smaller number than today's Pentagon routinely stations overseas (almost 100,000 in Europe, 25,000 in the Persian Gulf, 37,000 in Korea, and another 20,000 in Japan). At its peacetime Victorian peak in 1897, the British Empire rested on the bayonets of 55 battalions of infantry stationed

abroad—about 40,000 troops. The locally recruited sepoy of the Indian Army brought the total number of British imperial forces in 1897 to 356,000—slightly larger than the size of the Roman Army at the time of the Emperor Trajan in the early second century A.D., the period of Rome’s greatest extent.

There were always far more British troops stationed in Ireland than in India, and as Rudyard Kipling suggested in “The Green Flag,” his tale of Irish heroism in imperial service, more Irish and Scottish than English troops in India. As Rome had done, the British Raj defended itself with auxiliary forces recruited from the ruled. And yet, having successfully devised the concept of empire on the cheap, the British fell into a technology trap: When sail gave way to steam, carefully spaced coaling stations defined the route to India. The British showed little interest in the Middle East until the building of the Suez Canal in the 1870s required a British strategic presence along the route to the jewel in the imperial crown. Even then, the “imperial” presence was legally less than met the eye. Egypt retained its king, its army, and its customs, while Britain pulled the strings. Throughout the Persian Gulf region, British advisers saw to it that British interests were paramount, without the expense of imperial rule. The Bank of Persia, for example, was founded and run by Englishmen. When the emirs of Aden proved unwilling to build the lighthouses British navigation required in the Red Sea, the P & O Steamship Company built and manned its own on Dardalus Reef.

The erection of that lighthouse out of commercial self-interest was also an act with altruistic implications, and in that respect it sheds light on the current debate about the nature of the American imperium. The British Empire defined its role in terms of a wider good, akin to *la mission civilisatrice* of its French contemporary. Again, the oceanic character of the British imperial project is central. Once its freebooters and licensed pirates had seized command of the Caribbean and North American waters from the Spaniards in the 16th century, the British found it in their commercial interest to suppress piracy; they did so by enacting what became the first enforced international law. In the 19th century, motivated in part by guilt over previous profits, the British ordered the Royal Navy to suppress the slave trade.

**T**he construction of lighthouses and the suppression of piracy and the slave trade gave some meaning to the usually self-serving British claim to be defending the freedom of the seas. For a trading nation such as Britain, peaceful and safely navigable waters were useful, but they also benefited others. Under the benign rule of Britannia, the seas became a common good for all seafarers. And under the guns of the Royal Navy, sovereign states that borrowed money (usually from the City of London) and refused to pay found themselves required to do so. British troops would be landed to seize the ports, control the customs operations, and impose duties and tariffs, as happened in Egypt, until the debt was repaid. If the property of British citizens suffered in local riots, there

## The Peculiar Empire



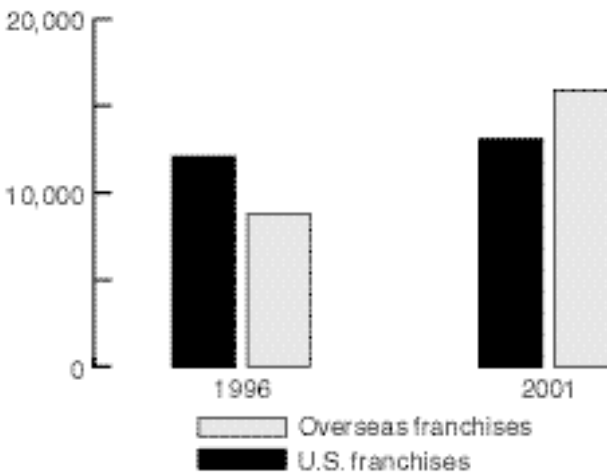
The U.S. defense budget will climb to some \$379 billion next year, a 17 percent increase in two years. Yet in historical terms defense claims a small share of national wealth.

### U.S. Bases Abroad, 1947–2000

	1947	1949	1953	1957	1967	1975	1988	2000
Europe, Canada & North Atlantic	506	258	446	566	673	633	627	438
Pacific & Southeast Asia	343	235	291	256	271	183	121	186
Latin America & the Caribbean	113	59	61	46	55	40	39	14
Middle East & Africa	74	28	17	15	15	9	7	7
South Asia	103	2	0	0	0	0	0	1
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>1,139</b>	<b>582</b>	<b>815</b>	<b>883</b>	<b>1,014</b>	<b>865</b>	<b>794</b>	<b>646</b>

Sources: James R. Blaker, *United States Overseas Basing* (1990), *Defense Base Report* (2001)

### McDonald's Goes Global, 1996–2001



One indicator of the “soft power” of American ideas and culture is the global march of McDonald’s, which last year had nearly 16,000 branches abroad—more than in the United States.

was retaliation: When, for example, Athenian warehouses belonging to Don Pacifico, a Jewish merchant who was a British subject of Gibraltar, were damaged, the British fleet bombarded the Greek port of Piraeus until proper compensation was paid. It was in defense of this high-handed action before Parliament that Lord Palmerston made the clearest correlation between the empires of Britain and Rome: “As the Roman, in days of old, held himself free from indignity, when he could say ‘*Civis Romanus sum*,’ so also a British subject, in whatever land he may be, shall feel confident that the watchful eye and the strong arm of England will protect him against injustice and wrong.”

Freedom of the seas, the defense of property rights, and the ability to enforce commercial contracts were the essential building blocks of that surge of economic growth and prosperity that marked the Victorian age. British investors financed the railroads that opened the American West, the pampas of Argentina, and the gold mines of South Africa. Vessels were launched from the shipyards of the rivers Clyde and Tyne and Humber, powered by the coal fields of Wales and Durham, and insured by Lloyds of London. The Reuters news service informed all customers—in English, which was also the language of navigation—of the price of commodity X at port Y in the universal currency of the gold sovereign as produced at London’s Royal Mint. The ships, the coal, the insurance, and the gold coins were available, like the seas, to all comers, just as the British market was in those days of free trade, when Britain was the exporting and importing customer of first and last resort.

The parallels are clear between the role of the British Empire in fostering the first great wave of globalization in the 19th century and that of the United States in promoting the second in the latter half of the 20th century. But does that make the United States, as ruler of the waves, guarantor of global finance, prime foreign investor, and leading importer, an empire? It certainly makes the United States, for all the universal benefits its broadly benign hegemony has brought, as unpopular as Britain once was. “No people are so disliked out of their own country,” noted the American traveler Robert Laird Collier of the British during a visit to their homeland in the 1880s. “They assume superiority. As a nation they are intensely selfish and arrogant.”

Collier sounds mild by comparison with the Indian novelist Arunhati Roy, who wrote the following in Britain’s *Guardian* in September 2001: “What is Osama bin Laden? He’s America’s family secret. He is the American president’s dark doppel-

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gänger. The savage twin of all that purports to be beautiful and civilized. He has been sculpted from the spare rib of a world laid to waste by America's foreign policy: its gunboat diplomacy, its nuclear arsenal, its vulgarly stated policy of 'full-spectrum dominance,' its chilling disregard for non-American lives, its barbarous military interventions, its support for despotic and dictatorial regimes, its merciless economic agenda that has munched through the economies of poor countries like a cloud of locusts. Its marauding multinationals who are taking over the air we breathe, the ground we stand on, the water we drink, the thoughts we think."

So the charge of imperialism stumbles forth again, and comes loaded with a wider postmodern meaning, at least on bestseller lists, in universities and among radical groups who regard globalization as the new focus of unjust imperial authority. The success of *Empire* (2001), a sprawling and grandiose book from Harvard University Press about the power structures of the global economy, testifies both to a resurgent concern with imperialism and to the controversial implications of the current extraordinary role of the United States, the sole superpower. The authors of *Empire* are Michael Hardt, a professor of literature at Duke University, and Antonio Negri, an Italian revolutionary theorist and professor at the University of Padua who is serving a prison term on charges of practicing what he preached with the Red Brigades. They attempt to resuscitate Lenin's imploded theory of imperialism as the last resort of capitalism: "What used to be conflict or competition among several imperialist powers has in important respects been replaced by the idea of a single power that overdetermines them all, structures them in a unitary way, and treats them under one common notion of right that is decidedly post-colonial and post-imperialist."

*Empire*, despite its flaws, deserves to be taken seriously, if only because among the anti-globalization militants who mobilize against World Bank or Group of Eight or World Trade Organization summits, it is hailed as the *Das Kapital* of the 21st century. The book's argument is confused, sometimes suggesting that the United States is the new single empire, and sometimes suggesting that, beyond any petty definitions of nationality, the new dispensation is "empire as system"—though a system highly congenial to American interests. Countries such as Britain, France, and Japan have built vast corporations with a global reach, but they operate within an economic system of which the United States is the financial linchpin and military guarantor.

This free-trading, free-market, American-dominated empire, Hardt and Negri contend, has become an all-encompassing presence, a form of cultural hegemony (to use Antonio Gramsci's phrase) that influences the consciousness of all who live under it. Although the argument is rather subtler than that the empire has developed Disney World and friendly clowns at McDonald's to lure the infant who will become the future consumer, a cardinal feature of this new American predominance is indeed its allure, in addition to its power. Joseph S. Nye, dean of the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University, calls this characteristic "soft power," the power to make others want the things America wants. It's a

force much easier to wield than hard, military power. The process is hardly new. Indian schoolboys under the Raj grew up dreaming of playing cricket at Lord's Ground in London, and African and Arab children in the French Empire were brought up with a history textbook that represented their forebears as "our ancestors, the Gauls."

But France and Britain, like Rome before them, lost their empires. And there is no guarantee that America's current superiority will endure. Despite its military dominance, America may not be able to maintain the political will, supply the financial means, and guarantee the technological monopolies to sustain its lonely eminence indefinitely. Regional challengers, ever more likely to be nuclear armed, already have the muscle to perturb and distract—and may someday have the power to deter or even attack—the United States. To manage what is likely to become a turbulent political environment, the United States should look beyond the simplistic image of itself as the modern Rome. Its choices for a sustainable grand strategy in the 21st century might better be defined by two other models from classical times, Athens and Sparta. Which does America wish to be?

Athens would be the more congenial model for a free-trading, self-indulgent democracy with a strong naval tradition and a robust belief in the merits and survivability of its own civilization. But there is much in the American political and military culture that leans to the fortress mentality and uncompromising attitudes of Sparta. America as Sparta would be introspective, defensive, protectionist, and unilateralist. It would prefer clients and satellites to allies that might someday challenge its primacy. It would seek to maintain military superiority at all costs and be suspicious of the erosions of national sovereignty that might result from cooperation with other states. America as Athens would join allies and partners in collaborative ventures with a common purpose, such as global warming treaties and international legal structures. It would be extrovert and open, encourage the growth of democracies and trading partners, and help to build a world where all can enjoy freedom and dream of prosperity.

**P**ut in those terms, the choice for America makes itself. And yet, the choice ultimately may not matter. Athens and Sparta each flourished in its turn and then faded, just as the Roman, British, and Soviet empires did—indeed, as every empire has done. What remains after empires fade is neither their weapons nor their wealth. Rather, they leave behind the ideas and the arts and the sciences that seem to flourish best amid the great stability of empires. We now remember Athens for its gifts of philosophy, mathematics, drama, and democracy, just as we acknowledge the inheritance from Britain of the King James Bible and Shakespeare, a free press and jury trials, and the magnificent defiance that saved the world in 1940. Whatever its fate, America, too, will live on—for its constitution and its movies and its having placed the first man on the moon. Of the Soviet empire we now remember the Gulag, and how difficult it was to find toothpaste. □

# New Rome, New Jerusalem

by Andrew J. Bacevich

**N**o longer fodder for accusations and denials, American imperialism has of late become a proposition to be considered on its merits. In leading organs of opinion, such as *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, the notion that the United States today presides over a global imperium has achieved something like respectability.

This is a highly salutary development. For only by introducing the idea of empire into the mainstream of public discourse does it become possible to address matters far more pressing than mulling over the semantic distinctions between empire and hegemony and “global leadership.” What precisely is the nature of the Pax Americana? What is its purpose? What are the challenges and pitfalls that await the United States in the management of its domain? What are the likely costs of empire, moral as well as material, and who will pay them? These are the questions that are now beginning to find a place on the agenda of U.S. foreign policy.

As befits a nation founded on the conviction of its own uniqueness, the American empire is like no other in history. Indeed, the peculiar American approach to empire offers a striking affirmation of American exceptionalism. For starters, that approach eschews direct rule over subject peoples. Apart from a handful of possessions left over from a brief, anomalous land grab in 1898, we have no colonies. We prefer access and influence to ownership. Ours is an informal empire, composed not of satellites or fiefdoms but of nominally coequal states. In presiding over this empire, we prefer to exercise our authority indirectly, as often as not through intermediary institutions in which the United States enjoys the predominant role but does not wield outright control (e.g., the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, the United Nations Security Council, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Bank).

Although we enjoy unassailable military supremacy and are by no means averse to using force, we prefer seduction to coercion. Rather than impose our will by the sword, we count on the allure of the “American way of life” to win over doubters and subvert adversaries. In the imperium’s most valued precincts, deference to Washington tends to be rendered voluntarily. Thus, postwar Europe, viewing the United States as both protector and agent of economic revival, actively pursued American dominion, thereby laying the basis for an “empire by invitation” that persists even though European prosperity has long since been restored and threats to Europe’s security have all but disappeared. An analogous situation prevails in the Pacific, where Japan and other states, more than able to defend themselves, willingly conform to an American-ordered security regime.





*Wilson's way? A 1917 poster summoning Americans to the Great War struck a theme that still resonates across the political spectrum: America has a transcendent mission in the world.*

Imperial powers are all alike in their shared devotion to order. Imperial powers differ from one another in the values they purport to inculcate across their realm. To the extent that the empires of Spain, France, and Great Britain defined their purpose (at least in part) as spreading the benefits of Western civilization, the present-day Pax Americana qualifies as their historical successor. But whereas those earlier imperial ventures specialized in converting pagans or enlightening savages, the ultimate value and the ultimate aspiration of the American imperium is freedom. Per Thomas Jefferson, ours is an “empire of liberty.”

From the outset, Americans self-consciously viewed the United States as an enterprise imbued with a providential significance extending far beyond the nation's boundaries. America was no sooner created than it became, in the words of the poet Philip Freneau, "a New Jerusalem sent down from heaven." But the salvation this earthly Zion promised was freedom, not eternal life. Recall George Washington's first inaugural address, in 1789: "The preservation of the sacred fire of liberty," he declared, had been "intrusted to the hands of the American people." The imperative in Washington's day not to promulgate the sacred fire but simply to keep it from being extinguished

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reflected a realistic appraisal of the young republic's standing among the nations of the world. For the moment, it lacked the capacity to do more than model freedom.

Over the course of the next 200 years, that would change. By the time the Berlin Wall fell in 1989, effectively bringing to a close a century of epic ideological struggle, the New Jerusalem had ascended to a category of its own among

the world's powers. The United States was dominant politically, economically, culturally, and, above all, militarily. In effect, the New Jerusalem had become the New Rome, an identity that did not supplant America's founding purpose but pointed toward its fulfillment—and the fulfillment of history itself. To President Bill Clinton, the moment signified that "the fullness of time" was at hand. Thomas Paine's claim that Americans had it in their power "to begin the world over again" no longer seemed preposterous. Salvation beckoned. In Reinhold Niebuhr's evocative phrase, the United States stood poised to complete its mission of "tutoring mankind on its pilgrimage to perfection."

**E**arly Americans saw the task of tutoring mankind as a directive from on high; later Americans shouldered the burden out of a profound sense of self-interest. Despite the frequent allusions to liberty in describing that pilgrimage's final destination and in justifying the use of American power, the architects of U.S. policy in the 20th century never viewed empire as an exercise in altruism. Rather, at least from the time of Woodrow Wilson, they concluded that only by protecting and promoting the freedom of others could Americans fully guarantee their nation's own well-being. The two were inextricably linked.

>ANDREW J. BACEVICH is a professor of international relations at Boston University. His book *American Empire: The Realities and Consequences of U.S. Diplomacy*, will be published in the fall by Harvard University Press. Copyright © 2002 by Andrew J. Bacevich.

In the eyes of Wilson and his heirs, to distinguish between American ideals (assumed to be universal) and American interests (increasingly global in scope) was to make a distinction without a difference. It was a plain fact that successive crusades to advance those ideals—against German militarism in 1917, fascism and Japanese imperialism in 1941, and communism after World War II—resulted in the United States’ accruing unprecedented power. Once the smoke had cleared, the plain fact defined international politics: One nation with its own particular sense of how the world should operate stood like a colossus astride the globe.

Not surprisingly, Americans viewed the distribution of power as a sort of cosmic judgment, an affirmation that the United States was (in a phrase favored by politicians in the 1990s) on “the right side of history.” American preeminence offered one measure of humanity’s progress toward freedom, democracy, and world peace. Those few who persisted in thinking otherwise—in American parlance, “rogue regimes”—marked themselves not only as enemies of the United States but as enemies of freedom itself.

**T**he barbarous events of September 11 revealed that the pilgrimage to perfection was far from over. But not for a moment did they cause American political leaders to question the project’s feasibility. If anything, September 11 reinforced their determination to complete the journey. In offering his own explanation for the attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, George W. Bush refused to countenance even the possibility that an assault on symbols of American economic and military power might have anything to do with how the United States employed its power. He chose instead to frame the issue at hand in terms of freedom. Why do they hate us? “They hate our freedoms,” Bush explained. Thus did the president skillfully deflect attention from the consequences of empire.

September 11 became the occasion for a new war, far wider in scope than any of the piddling military interventions that had kept American soldiers marching hither and yon during the preceding decade. In many quarters, that conflict has been described as the equivalent of another world war. The description is apt. As the multifaceted U.S. military campaign continues to unfold, it has become clear that the Bush administration does not intend simply to punish those who perpetrated the attacks on New York and Washington or to preclude the recurrence of any such incidents. America’s actual war aims are far more ambitious. The United States seeks to root out terror around the globe. It seeks also to render radical Islam and the nations that make up the “axis of evil” incapable of threatening the international order.

But there is more still: The Bush administration has used the war on terror as an occasion for conducting what is, in effect, a referendum on U.S. global primacy. In this cause, as President Bush has emphasized, all must declare their allegiance: Nations either align themselves with the United States or they cast their lot with the terrorists—and, by implication, can expect to share their fate. As a final byproduct of September 11, the administration has seized the opportuni-

ty to promulgate a new Bush Doctrine, incorporating such novel concepts as “anticipatory self-defense” and “preemptive deterrence.” Through the Bush Doctrine, the United States—now combining, in the words of Stanley Hoffmann, the roles of “high-noon sheriff and proselytizing missionary”—lays claim to wider prerogatives for employing force to reorder the world.

In short, the conflict joined after September 11 may well qualify as a war *against* terror and *against* those who “hate our freedoms.” But it is no less genuinely a conflict waged *on behalf of* the American imperium, a war in which, to fulfill its destiny as the New Jerusalem, the United States, as never before, is prepared to exert its authority as the New Rome.

Thus, when the president vowed in December 2001 that “America will lead the world to peace,” he was not simply resurrecting some windy Wilsonian platitude. He was affirming the nation’s fundamental strategic purpose and *modus operandi*. The United States will “lead”—meaning that it will persevere in its efforts to refashion the international order, employing for that purpose the preeminent power it acquired during the century of its ascendancy (which it has no intention of relinquishing in the century just begun). And it will do so with an eye toward achieving lasting “peace”—meaning an orderly world, conducive to American enterprise, friendly to American values, and perpetuating America’s status as sole superpower. This was the aim of U.S. policy prior to September 11; it remains the aim of the Bush administration today.

**H**ow widespread is support for this imperial enterprise? Despite the tendency of American statesmen from Wilson’s day to our own to resort to coded language whenever addressing questions of power, the project is not some conspiracy hatched by members of the elite

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and then foisted on an unsuspecting citizenry. The image of the United States leading the world to peace (properly understood) commands broad assent in virtually all segments of American society. A fringe of intellectuals, activists, and self-described radicals might take umbrage at the prospect of a world remade in America’s image and policed by

American power, but out on the hustings the notion plays well—so long, at least, as the required exertions are not too taxing. The fact is that Americans like being number one, and since the end of the Cold War have come to accept that status as their due. Besides, someone has to run the world. Who else can do the job?

What are the empire’s prospects? In some respects, the qualities that have contributed to the nation’s success in other endeavors may serve the United States well in this one. Compared with the citizens of Britain in the

## *A Humanitarian Empire*

Empires are not always planned. The original American colonies began as the unintended byproduct of British religious strife. The British political class was not so sure it wanted to rule India, but commercial interests dragged it in there anyway. The United States today will be an even more reluctant imperialist. But a new imperial moment has arrived, and by virtue of its power America is bound to play the leading role. The question is not whether America will seek to fill the void created by the demise of European empires but whether it will acknowledge that this is what it is doing. Only if Washington acknowledges this task will its response be coherent.

The first obstacle to acknowledgment is the fear that empire is infeasible. True, imposing order on failed states is expensive, difficult, and potentially dangerous. . . . But these expenses need to be set against the cost of fighting wars against terrorists, drug smugglers, and other international criminals. . . .

The second obstacle to facing the imperial challenge is the stale choice between unilateralism and multilateralism. Neither option, as currently understood, provides a robust basis for responding to failed states. Unilateralists rightly argue that weak allies and cumbersome multilateral arrangements undercut international engagement. Yet a purely unilateral imperialism is no more likely to work than the sometimes muddled multilateral efforts assembled in the past. Unilateralists need to accept that chaotic countries are more inclined to accept foreign nation-builders if they have international legitimacy. And U.S. opinion surveys suggest that international legitimacy matters domestically as well. The American public's support for the Persian Gulf War and the Afghan conflict reflected the perception that each operation was led by the United States but backed by the court of world opinion.

The best hope of grappling with failed states lies in institutionalizing this mix of U.S. leadership and international legitimacy. Fortunately, one does not have to look far to see how this could be accomplished. The World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) already embody the same hybrid formula: Both institutions reflect American thinking and priorities yet are simultaneously multinational. The mixed record of both institutions—notably the World Bank's failure on failed states—should not obscure their organizational strengths: They are more professional and less driven by national patronage than are United Nations agencies.

A new international body with the same governing structure could be set up to deal with nation-building. It would be subject neither to the frustrations of the UN Security Council, with its Chinese and Russian vetoes, nor to those of the UN General Assembly, with its gridlocked one-country–one-vote system. . . . It would assemble nation-building muscle and expertise and could be deployed wherever its American-led board decided, thus replacing the ad hoc begging and arm twisting characteristic of current peacekeeping efforts. Its creation would not amount to an imperial revival. But it would fill the security void that empires left—much as the system of mandates did after World War I ended the Ottoman Empire.

The new fund would need money, troops, and a new kind of commitment from the rich powers and it could be established only with strong U.S. leadership. Summoning such leadership is immensely difficult, but America and its allies have no easy options in confronting failed states. They cannot wish away the problem that chaotic power vacuums can pose. They cannot fix it with international institutions as they currently exist. . . . They must either mold the international machinery to address the problems of their times, as their predecessors did in creating the United Nations, the World Bank, and the IMF after World War II. Or they can muddle along until some future collection of leaders rises to the challenge.

—*Sebastian Mallaby*

*Sebastian Mallaby, the author of After Apartheid: The Future of South Africa (1992), is a columnist for The Washington Post. Excerpted from an article that appeared in Foreign Affairs (March–April 2002).*

age of Victoria or of Rome during the time of the Caesars, Americans wear their imperial mantle lightly. They go about the business of empire with a singular lack of pretense. Although Washington, D.C. has come to exude the self-importance of an imperial capital, those who live beyond its orbit have, thus far at least, developed only a limited appetite for pomp, privilege, and display. We are unlikely to deplete our treasury erecting pyramids or other monuments to our own ostensible greatness. In matters of taste, American sensibilities tend to be popular rather than aristocratic. Our excesses derive from our enthusiasms—frequently vulgar, typically transitory—rather than from any of the crippling French diseases: exaggerated self-regard, intellectual bloat, cynicism, and envy. All things considered, America’s imperial ethos is pragmatic and without ostentation, evidence, perhaps, that the nation’s rise to great-power status has not yet fully expunged its republican origins. Above all, measured against societies elsewhere in the developed world, American society today seems remarkably vigorous and retains an astonishing capacity to adapt, to recover, and to reinvent itself.

That said, when it comes to sustaining the *Pax Americana*, the United States faces several challenges.

First, no one is really in charge. Ours is an empire without an emperor. Although in times of crisis Americans instinctively look to the top for leadership—a phenomenon that greatly benefited George W. Bush after September 11—the ability of any president to direct the affairs of the American imperium is limited, in both degree and duration. Though he is routinely described as the most powerful man in the world, the president of the United States in fact enjoys limited authority and freedom of action. The system of government codified by the Constitution places a premium on separation and balance among the three branches that vie

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with one another in Washington, but also between the federal government and agencies at the state and local levels. Hardly less significant is the impact of other participants in the political free-for-all—parties, interest groups, lobbies, entrenched bureaucracies, and the media—that on

any given issue can oblige the chief executive to dance to their tune. The notion of an “imperial presidency” is a fiction, and for that Americans can be grateful. But the fact remains that the nation’s political system is not optimally configured for the management of empire.

Second, although popular support for the empire is real, it is, in all likelihood, highly contingent. The heirs of the so-called greatest generation have little stomach for sacrifice. They expect the benefits of empire to outweigh the burdens and responsibilities, and to do so decisively. The gar-



*Since 9/11, U.S. troops have been dispatched to about 20 countries, often to train local forces to combat Muslim extremists. This officer joined 1,200 other Americans in the Philippines in January.*

den-variety obligations of imperial policing—for example, keeping peace in the Balkans or securing a U.S. foothold in Central Asia—are not causes that inspire average Americans to hurry down to their local recruiter's office. To put it bluntly, such causes are not the kind that large numbers of Americans are willing to die for.

**I**n this sense, the empire's point of greatest vulnerability is not the prospect of China's becoming a rival superpower or of new terrorist networks' supplanting Al Qaeda—those developments we can handle—but rather the questionable willingness of the American people to foot the imperial bill. Sensitive to the limits of popular support—as vividly demonstrated after a single night's action in Mogadishu in 1993—policymakers over the past decade have exerted themselves mightily to pass that bill off to others. In the process, they have devised imaginative techniques for ensuring that when blood spills, it won't be American blood. Hence, the tendency to rely on high-tech weapons launched from beyond the enemy's reach, on proxies to handle any dirty work on the ground, or, as a last resort, on a cadre of elite professional soldiers who are themselves increasingly detached from civilian society.

Over the past decade, this effort to maintain the American empire on the cheap has (with the notable exception of September 11) enjoyed remarkable success. Whether policymakers can sustain this success indefinitely remains an open question, especially when each victory gained with apparent ease—Bosnia, Kosovo, Afghanistan—only rein-

forces popular expectations that the next operation will also be neat, tidy, and virtually fault-free.

The third challenge facing the American imperium concerns freedom itself. For if peace (and U.S. security) requires that the world be free as Americans define freedom, then the specifics of that definition complicate the management of empire in ways that thus far have received inadequate attention.

Here's the catch: As Americans continuously reinvent themselves and their society, they also reinvent—and in so doing, radically transform—what they mean

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by freedom. They mean not just independence, or even democracy and the rule of law. Freedom as Americans understand it today encompasses at least two other broad imperatives: maximizing opportunities for the creation of wealth and removing whatever impediments remain to confine the so-

vereign self. Freedom has come to mean treating the market and market values as sacrosanct (the economic agenda of the Right) and celebrating individual autonomy (the cultural agenda of the Left).

**W**ithout question, adherence to the principles of free enterprise offers the most efficient means for generating wealth. Without question, too, organizing society around such principles undermines other sources of authority. And that prospect mobilizes in opposition to the United States those in traditional and, especially, religious societies who are unwilling to abandon the old order.

The implications of shedding the last constraints on the individual loom even larger. The contemporary pursuit of freedom has put into play beliefs, arrangements, and institutions that were once viewed as fundamental and unalterable. Gender, sexuality, identity, the definition of marriage and family, and the origins, meaning, sacredness, and malleability of life—in American society, they are all now being re-examined to accommodate the claims of freedom.

Some view this as an intoxicating prospect. Others see it as the basis for a domestic culture war. In either case, pursuant to their present-day understanding of what freedom entails, Americans have embarked on an effort to reengineer the human person, reorder basic human relationships, and reconstruct human institutions that have existed for millennia.

To render a summary judgment on this project is not yet possible. But surely it is possible to appreciate that some in the world liken it to stepping off a moral precipice and view the New Jerusalem with trepidation. Their fears, and the resistance to which fear gives birth, all but guarantee that the legions of the New Rome will have their hands full for some time to come. □



# Toward a Global Society of States

by Michael Lind

Here is an instructive and entertaining exercise for students of American foreign policy. Match the quotation to the appropriate American statesman: Alexander Hamilton, Thomas Jefferson, Theodore Roosevelt, or Woodrow Wilson.

The first quotation is this: “Our aim should be from time to time to take such steps as may be possible toward creating something like an organization of the civilized nations, because as the world becomes more highly organized the need for navies and armies will diminish.” Woodrow Wilson, you might think, the naive idealist who dreamed that the League of Nations would put an end to war. But no. The words belong rather to President Theodore Roosevelt, in his 1905 State of the Union address.

Perhaps you’ll have better luck with the second example: “Unhappily for the other three [parts of the world], Europe, by her arms and by her negotiations, by force and by fraud, has in different degrees extended her domination over them all. Africa, Asia and America have successively felt her domination. The superiority she has long maintained has tempted her to plume herself as the mistress of the world, and to consider the rest of mankind as created for her benefit. Men . . . have in direct terms attributed to her inhabitants a physical superiority. . . . Facts have too long supported these arrogant pretensions of the European.” Thomas Jefferson, surely, denouncing European imperialism and racism. No again: Alexander Hamilton, the quintessential realist, in *The Federalist* 11.

Here, in fact, is Jefferson, sounding like the “realist” Hamilton in a letter of 1814: “Surely none of us wish to see Bonaparte conquer Russia, and lay thus at his feet the whole of Europe. This done, England would be but a breakfast. . . . It cannot be to our interest that all Europe should be reduced to a single monarchy.” And here, sounding like his bellicose critic Roosevelt, is Wilson in 1919 describing what it would take for the United States to be an independent great power if the League of Nations did not secure world peace: “We must be physically ready for anything to come. We must have a great standing army. We must see to it that every man in America is trained to arms. We must see to it that there are munitions and guns enough for an army that means a mobilized nation.”

As the quotation game suggests, it’s a mistake to divide the architects of American foreign policy into “realists” and “idealists.” Realpolitik of the Continental kind, with its contempt for international law and its elevation

of the pursuit of national self-interest by brute force, has had little influence in the United States. (It's not surprising that one of the few American proponents of this school, Henry Kissinger, is a German émigré.) American realists such as Hamilton, Theodore Roosevelt, and Henry Cabot Lodge had a healthy respect for the role of military power in foreign affairs, but they also believed in international cooperation—among “civilized” nations, if not among all countries. America's leading “idealists,” for their part, have been willing to use force, particularly when the interests of the United States and the international community have converged. Jefferson waged war on the Barbary pirates, who threatened American shipping and Mediterranean commerce in general. Wilson ruined his presidency and his health in his campaign to persuade the Senate to ratify U.S. membership in the League of Nations, the purpose of which was not to eliminate the role of power in world politics but to replace the “balance of power” with a “community of power.”

If the American tradition of foreign policy, then, is neither militaristic

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realpolitik nor ineffectual pacifism, how should it be described? The mainstream American philosophy of foreign policy, from the 18th century to the 21st, belongs to a broad school of thought that scholars call the “Grotian tradition,” after Hugo Grotius, a 17th-century Dutch theorist of international law. From Grotius and like-minded thinkers

such as Samuel von Pufendorf and Emmerich de Vattel, the Founding Fathers learned that, after the 17th-century Wars of Religion, the Roman empire and medieval Christendom in the West had been replaced by a “society of states,” their number limited initially to the countries of Europe and—by extension—their settler colonies in the Americas. “Europe,” Montesquieu declared, “is a nation composed of many nations.” The British philosopher David Hume similarly viewed Europe and its American and Russian outliers as part of a great commonwealth made up of “a number of neighboring and independent states, connected together by commerce and policy.” “A society of states (or international society),” the 20th-century British scholar Hedley Bull has written, “exists when a group of states, conscious of certain common interests and values, form a society in the sense that they conceive themselves to be bound by a common set of rules of their relations with one another, and share in the working of common institutions.” There is a complex mixture of order and anarchy in the international system, best described perhaps by Alexis de Tocqueville when he wrote of “the society of nations

>MICHAEL LIND is a senior fellow at the New America Foundation in Washington, D.C., and the coauthor with Ted Halstead of *The Radical Center: The Future of American Politics* (2001). Copyright © 2002 by Michael Lind.



*Attempting to put a benign spin on America's first major imperial adventure, "New Faces at the Thanksgiving Dinner" (1898) cast the colonies won in the Spanish-American War in an unflattering light.*

in which each separate people is, as it were, a citizen—a society always semi-barbarous, even in the most civilized epochs, whatever efforts are made to improve and regulate the relations of those who compose it.”

The greatest threat to the European society of states came from conquerors such as Charles V, Louis XIV, and Napoleon, who sought to replace the system of independent states with a new empire resembling that of Rome. In the 17th century, Pufendorf wrote that all European states were “obliged to oppose with all their power” what he called “the monarchy of Europe, or the universal monopoly, this being the fuel with which the whole world may be put to flame.” Montesquieu argued that modern states should try to avoid being absorbed into a single “universal monarchy” such as the Roman Empire. And Hume, in his essay “Of the Balance of Power,” agreed that states should unite in alliances to prevent any single state from reducing them to the status of mere provinces in a universal empire.

**I**n their attitude toward the Western society of states, the American Founders were conservative. They seceded from the British Empire to join the existing international system, not to overthrow it, as the French Jacobins and Soviet Communists would attempt to do. Even as they hoped that, over time, more states would adopt republican government on the basis of the American example, they adopted the diplomatic institutions and norms previously worked out by the European monarchies and empires. Thus, the great American legal scholar James Kent begins his *Commentaries on American Law* (1826) as follows: “When the United States ceased to be a part of the British empire, and assumed the character of an independent nation, they became subject to that system of rules which reason, morality, and custom had established among the civilized nations of Europe, as their public law.”

## Empire without “Overstretch”

It is easy to say that when Osama bin Laden assaulted the world’s remaining superpower, he and his network and those who supported him got their just desserts and appropriate oblivion.

But that conclusion is almost beside the point.

The larger lesson—and one stupefying to the Russian and Chinese military, worrying to the Indians, and disturbing to proponents of a common European defense policy—is that in military terms there is only one player on the field that counts. . . .

To put it another way, while the battle between the United States and international terrorism and rogue states may indeed be asymmetrical, perhaps a far greater asymmetry may be emerging: namely, the one between the United States and the rest of the powers.

How is this to be explained? First, by money. For the past decade and well before that, the United States has been spending more on its defense forces, absolutely and relatively, than any other nation in history. While the European powers chopped their post-Cold War military spending, China held its in check, and Russia’s defense budget collapsed in the 1990s, the U.S. Congress duly obliged the Pentagon with annual budgets ranging from about \$260 billion in the middle of the decade to this year’s \$329 billion.

Everyone knew that, with the Soviet Union’s forces in a state of decrepitude, the United States was in a class of its own. But it is simply staggering to learn that this single country—a democratic republic that claims to despise large government—now spends more each year on the military than the next nine-largest national defense budgets combined. . . .

Nothing has ever existed like this disparity of power; nothing, I have returned to all of the comparative defense spending and military personnel statistics over the past 500 years that I compiled in *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*, and no other nation comes close. The Pax Britannica was run on the cheap, Britain’s army was much smaller than European armies, and even the Royal Navy was equal only to the next two navies. Right now all the other navies in the world combined could not dent American maritime supremacy.

Charlemagne’s empire was merely western European in its reach. The Roman empire stretched farther afield, but there was another great empire in Persia, and a larger one in China. There is, therefore, no comparison.

But this money has to come from somewhere, primarily from the country’s own economic resources (in long wars, powers often borrow from abroad). Here again is an incomparable source of U.S. strength, and one that has been increasing in the past few years. . . . This steady economic growth, along with the curbing of inflation in the 1990s, produced the delightful result that America’s enormous defense expenditures could be pursued at a far lower relative cost to the country than the military spending of Ronald Reagan’s years.

In 1985, for example, the Pentagon’s budget equaled 6.5 percent of gross domestic product and was seen by many as a cause of U.S. budgetary and economic growth problems. By 1998, defense spending’s share of GDP was down to 3.2 percent, and today it is not much greater.

Being Number One at great cost is one thing; being the world’s single superpower on the cheap is astonishing. . . .

What are the implications, for the world and for America itself?

First, it seems to me there is no point in the Europeans or Chinese wringing

their hands about U.S. predominance, and wishing it would go away. It is as if, among the various inhabitants of the apes and monkeys cage at the London Zoo, one creature had grown bigger and bigger—and bigger—until it became a 500-pound gorilla. It couldn't help becoming that big, and in a certain way America today cannot help being what it is either.

It is interesting to consider the possible implications for world affairs of the existence of such a giant in our midst. For example, what does it mean for other countries, especially those with a great-power past such as Russia and France, or with great-power aspirations such as India and Iran?

Russian president Vladimir Putin's government is faced with the difficult choice of trying to close the enormous power gap, or admitting that would merely overstrain Russia's resources and divert the nation from the more sensible pursuit of domestic peace and prosperity.

French Europeanists need either to recognize that the chances of creating a true equal to American military, diplomatic, and political weight in world affairs are an illusion, or they need to exploit the recent display of Europe's bystander role to make fresh efforts to unify the fractured continent.

Think, also, of the implications for China, perhaps the only country that—should its recent growth rates continue for the next 30 years and internal strife be avoided—might be a serious challenger to U.S. predominance. More immediately, relish the message this mind-boggling display of the American capacity to punish its opponents has sent to those nations who had hoped to change the local status quo in the Korean Peninsula, in the Taiwan Straits, the Middle East—in the not-too-distant future.

As the crew of the *Kitty Hawk* and other vessels of the U.S. Navy take their shore leave, one hears the distant rustle of military plans and feasibility studies by general staffs across the globe being torn up and dropped into the dustbin of history.

Reflect also on the implications for international organizations, especially those involved in Western defense and/or global peace and security. True, some NATO forces played an ancillary role, and European states lent bases to the United States, supplied intelligence, and rounded up suspected terrorists; but the organization's other members may have to face the prospect of being either a hollow shell when the Americans don't play, or an appendage to Washington when they do.

Can one have a reasonably balanced United Nations Security Council when there now exists, in addition to the gap between its five permanent veto members and the nonpermanent members, a tremendous and real gulf in the power and influence of one of the five and the other four? . . .

Will this "unipolar moment," as it was once called, continue for centuries? Surely not.

"If Sparta and Rome perished," Rousseau said, "what state can hope to endure forever?"

It is a fair point. America's present standing very much rests upon a decade of impressive economic growth. But were that growth to dwindle, and budgetary and fiscal problems to multiply over the next quarter of a century, then the threat of overstretch would return. In that event, the main challenge facing the world community could be the possible collapse of U.S. capacities and responsibilities, and the chaos that might ensue from such a scenario.

But from the flight deck of the USS *Enterprise*, that scenario seems a long way off for now.

—Paul Kennedy

*Paul Kennedy is a professor of history at Yale University and the author of many books, including The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers (1987). Adapted from an article in The Financial Times (February 2, 2002).*

Where Americans have differed from their European counterparts, without rejecting the basic customs and rules of the society of states, is in their deep antagonism toward imperialism, the coercive rule of one ethnic nation over others. (Early American writers who use “empire” in an archaic sense to mean “national territory” should not be interpreted as endorsing colonial rule.) In the past, American support for self-determination was often limited by racism. Southern slaveowners, for example, feared that the establishment in 1804 of a black Haitian republic, independent of France, would inspire slave revolts in the United States; tragically, at the Versailles Conference in 1919, the United States teamed up with the British Empire to block Japan’s proposal that international law ban racial discrimination. (By contrast, antiracism was a basic norm of the international system the United States helped to set up after 1945.)

But there has long been a more generous strain at work in the society. In the early 19th century, for example, the United States welcomed the independence of the Latin American republics from Spain for philosophical as much as for geopolitical reasons. The Monroe Doctrine, which held that the Americas should be an empire-free zone, was violated by France when it took advantage of civil war in the United States to establish a Mexican empire, headed by its puppet, the Hapsburg prince Maximilian. Abraham Lincoln, who had opposed the U.S. war against Mexico (1846–48), supported the republican nationalist Benito Juárez in his battle to free Mexico from France. After Lincoln’s assassination, the threat of U.S. intervention in Mexico led the French to withdraw. Lincoln was a principled anti-imperialist who hoped that the Union victory in the Civil War would inspire liberal republicans throughout the world.

Of course, the United States has at times engaged in old-fashioned territorial imperialism—it annexed northern Mexico; it conquered Spain’s Caribbean and Philippine empire in 1898; it repeatedly sent marines to topple or install governments in the Caribbean and Latin America. But America’s imperialism, despite episodes of brutality, was constrained by republican principles. With the exceptions of Alaska and Hawaii, the geographic expansion of the United States ended with the annexation of the thinly populated northern portion of Mexico. White American statesmen did not want to admit large nonwhite populations in Latin America and the Caribbean to full citizenship, as republican theory required, but they also did not want to rule them without their consent, as republican theory forbade. (Had it not been for 19th-century American racism, much more of Mexico might now be part of the Union.) The few small overseas territories the United States governs today, such as Puerto Rico and Guam, are anomalous exceptions that prove the rule.

Most U.S. interventions in the Caribbean, Central America, and the Philippines occurred to prevent rival great powers—imperial Germany and Japan in the early 20th century, the Soviet Union during the Cold War—from gaining control of crucial strategic assets. The Philippines and Hawaii were valuable chiefly as bases for a U.S. naval presence that kept the European empires and Japan from monopolizing the economic and military resources of China and its surrounding countries. Although some U.S. investors

exploited America's military role for their own purposes, sea power and geopolitical prestige, not profit, were on the minds of American presidents when they sent in the marines. When the evolution of naval and air power made the Panama Canal strategically irrelevant, the United States ceded it to Panama. There is no contradiction between this kind of limited and incidental strategic imperialism, which has permitted the United States to take part in global power struggles by using overseas military bases, and the principled hostility of American leaders to attempts by the European powers and Japan to divide most of the earth's inhabitants and resources among a small number of autarkic empires. Precedents for America's oceanic web of ports, canals, coaling stations, and airfields can be found in the maritime empires created by such older commercial republics as Venice and the Netherlands.

**T**he U.S. protectorate and alliance system during the Cold War, if it was an empire at all, was a temporary empire of defense, not an empire of conquest and exploitation. The presence of U.S. forces in West Germany and Japan allowed those countries to build strong democracies and vibrant economies without being intimidated by the Soviet Union and China. Although the United States supported anticommunist governments in West Germany and Italy in the early years of the Cold War, there was never any possibility that America would invade Western Europe and topple governments, as the Soviet Union did in East Germany (1952), Hungary (1956), and Czechoslovakia (1968). And unlike the Soviet Union, which parasitically exploited its more affluent Eastern European satellites, the United States helped restore Western Europe's economy through the Marshall Plan and encouraged the formation of a powerful economic rival, the European Economic

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*The United States has refused to sign the land mines convention, signed but not ratified the Kyoto Protocol and other pacts, and withdrawn from one major agreement, the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty.*

Community (now the European Union). American proxy wars in Korea, Indochina, Afghanistan, and other countries of no significant economic value were part of the campaign to thwart the Soviet bid for global military and diplomatic hegemony. It does not just distort language to call America's alliance diplomacy and antihegemonic wars against imperial and Nazi Germany and the Soviet bloc "imperialism" and "colonialism"; it obscures the truly innovative nature of what American leaders have sought to do.

**F**rom the time the United States emerged as a great power around 1900, most American leaders have shared the vision of a global society of states that would be an alternative to a world divided among closed imperial economic and military blocs. In the world that Americans wanted, applying the principle of self-determination would result in the replacement of large multinational, dynastic empires with dozens or hundreds of new nation-states—preferably, but not necessarily, democratic republics similar to the United States. In the postimperial world order envisioned by leading Americans before 1945, a global market based on free (or perhaps managed) trade would replace the exclusive economic blocs of the British, French, and other empires. This "Open Door" principle was first applied to prevent the carving up of China into imperial economic zones, and it was then generalized to the entire world economy after World War II through the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) and the World Trade Organization (WTO). International organizations—the League of Nations after World War I, the United Nations and other bodies after World War II—were to offer permanent forums for diplomacy; international law and the decrees of international institutions were to be enforced by a global steering committee led by great powers, such as the permanent members of the UN Security Council.

In the early 20th century, variants of this vision were shared by "realists" and "idealists" alike. To enforce international decisions and norms, for example, idealist Woodrow Wilson emphasized collective security actions taken by every nation in concert, while his realist critics Theodore Roosevelt and Henry Cabot Lodge favored international policing by a few "civilized" great powers, such as the United States, Britain, and France. But Roosevelt and Lodge shared with Wilson the goals of promoting international organization and arbitration and reciprocally reducing trade barriers.

The broadly shared American vision of a postimperial, global society of states was finally realized by Franklin D. Roosevelt—Theodore's cousin, who had served Wilson as an assistant secretary of the navy. During World War II, Article 3 of the 1941 Atlantic Charter, which declared the "right of all peoples to choose the form of government under which they live," was an accurate statement of American policy. When the British argued that Article 3 did not apply to their empire, Under Secretary of State Sumner Welles replied in 1942: "If this war is in fact a war for the liberation of peoples, it must assure the sovereign equality of peoples throughout the world, as well as in the world of the Americas. Our victory must bring in its train the liberation of all peoples. Discrimination between peoples because of their race, creed, or color must be abolished. The age of imperialism is ended."



Throughout World War II, FDR sought the peaceful liquidation of the old empires of his British and French allies, even as he joined them in opposing the new empires of Nazi Germany, imperial Japan, and fascist Italy. Although he was willing to make some concessions to them, the American president wanted the British out of India and the French out of Indochina, and he conditioned U.S. help for Britain on the abolition of “imperial preference” in trade and investment and the creation of a truly global economy. An aide’s report of comments made to him at Yalta by FDR reflects how much the president’s anti-imperial idealism was buttressed by realism:

The President said he was concerned about brown people in the East. He said that there are 1,100,000,000 brown people. In many Eastern countries, they are ruled by a handful of whites and they resent it. Our goal must be to help them achieve independence—1,100,000,000 enemies are dangerous. He said he included the 450,000,000 Chinese in that. He then added, Churchill doesn’t understand this.

Adolf Hitler, who had long dreamed of an alliance between Germany and Britain against the United States, ranted that Roosevelt “says he wants to save England but he means he wants to be ruler and heir of the British Empire.” In fact, FDR wanted to do something far more radical than merely create an American empire of a traditional kind. He wanted to create a nonimperial world—a global society of states to replace the old Europe-centered society of states. In return for giving up their exclusive empires, great powers would have a place in the new global system as joint guarantors of peaceful change. FDR’s list of global “policemen” varied; at different times he saw Britain, the Soviet Union, and China as partners of the United States. Whatever their identity, the great powers, rather than exploit their exclusive spheres of influence as predatory empires of the past had done, would act in concert to benefit the overall system, as the great powers of Europe had sometimes done in the 18th and 19th centuries.

FDR mistakenly assumed that the postwar Soviet Union would act as a traditional great power. Instead, after the defeat of Hitler, Joseph Stalin and his successors created an empire in Eastern Europe, helped bring Mao Zedong to power in China, and promoted the expansion of a Moscow-centered communist bloc that included outposts in Korea, Indochina, Cuba, and Africa. The veto power the Soviet Union enjoyed as a permanent member of the UN Security Council kept that body deadlocked from the late 1940s to the 1990s. At the same time, the need to enlist British and French support in the Cold War caused successive U.S. administrations to tolerate a slower pace of decolonization in Asia and Africa than FDR had envisioned.

Although the Grotian ideal of a civilized society of states has been the basis for mainstream American foreign policy, there has always been a concomitant dissenting tradition of American exceptionalism. In this view, the United States is not to be a new Roman Republic or a larger Britain but a new Israel. In 1952 Ronald Reagan, whose Midwestern mother belonged to the Disciples of Christ, echoed this venerable analogy between the United

States and Old Testament Israel: “I believe that God in shedding his grace on this country has always in this divine scheme of things kept an eye on our land and guided it as a promised land.”

The source of this messianic view of America’s role in the world is the Protestant Reformation. New England Protestants feared that the Roman Catholic Church, working through the British monarchy, might strangle the Protestant “saints” in their American refuge. The granting of toleration to Catholics in British Canada by the Quebec Act of 1774 alarmed many Protestants in the American colonies. In the imagination of today’s Protestant evangelicals, the United Nations and “secular humanism” have replaced the British Empire and the Catholic Church as the hubs of international evil, but apocalyptic paranoia remains part of American culture.

American exceptionalism oscillates between isolationism and evangelicalism.

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Virtue must be protected in America from a corrupt world—or imposed by America on a corrupt world. At times (such as the two decades between the First and Second World Wars), American exceptionalists have wanted to create a Fortress America and leave the rest of the world to succumb to decadence, anarchy, and tyranny. In other circumstances,

American exceptionalists have been energized by a millennial fervor for reforming the world. The two impulses have sometimes coexisted. In the 1890s, for example, one fervent Protestant evangelical politician, William Jennings Bryan, denounced American imperialism, and an equally fervent Protestant evangelical preacher, Josiah Strong, argued that it was America’s destiny to Christianize the world by means of an expansive foreign policy.

The isolationist wing and the evangelical wing of American exceptionalism share a dread of alliances: It might be necessary to make immoral concessions to allies to enlarge or maintain a coalition, and the purity of America’s purpose in foreign policy would then be diluted. Even worse, alliances might infect the godly American republic with Old World viruses—autocracy, perhaps, or collectivism. This fear explains why the United States participated in World War I as an associated power, not an ally. It explains, too, why the United States for many years refused to grant diplomatic recognition to the Soviet Union and the People’s Republic of China; merely to engage in ordinary diplomatic relations with an evil regime is to condone its crimes. American exceptionalism is responsible as well for the frequent use of economic and military sanctions to punish all kinds of transgressions by foreign countries. And its influence can be sensed both in the American Left’s enthusiasm for private disinvestment campaigns against countries with

objectionable governments and in much of the American Right's reflexive unilateralism and suspicion of international organizations and treaties.

During the Cold War, the realist and exceptionalist traditions were both represented among supporters of the successful U.S. strategy of containment of Soviet expansion. Realists sought to check and reduce Soviet imperial power, while exceptionalists viewed the struggle as one for universal human liberty—or against “godless” communism. But long before the end of the Cold War, during the Vietnam era, consensus in U.S. foreign policy had already broken down.

During the 1990s, the Clinton administration pursued what it called “assertive multilateralism”—signing a number of treaties, including the Kyoto Protocol and the treaty to create an international war crimes court, that even some Clinton Democrats had qualms about, and that the succeeding Bush administration unceremoniously dropped. The unilateralist philosophy that initially guided the presidency of George W. Bush in turn proved to be inadequate to dealing with the crisis in the Middle East. Multilateralism and unilateralism are tactics, and the attempt by pundits and policymakers to promote them to the level of strategic “doctrines” is a mistake.

The alternative to both a reflexive multilateralism that subordinates U.S. national interests to a veto by small and weak countries with their own agendas and an arrogant unilateralism that offends important allies is the strategy preferred by both Theodore and Franklin Roosevelt, who envisioned a concert of the “civilized” great powers. This approach places responsibility for the management of global peace and progress less on the UN General Assembly than on the permanent members of the UN Security Council—the United States, Russia, Britain, France, and China (all now democracies except for the last). The replacement of the obstructionist Soviet Union by a postimperial Russian nation-state has enabled the Security Council to function at times as its designers had intended—by authorizing joint great-power interventions in Kuwait and the Balkans, for example. The Security Council remains handicapped, however, by the fact that its permanent members do not include great powers such as India, Japan, and Germany.

A great-power concert can also work through institutions outside the UN system. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization, for example, was not part of the original UN framework, but since the end of the Cold War it has shown signs of evolving into a regional European/Middle Eastern police force. During the 1970s and 1980s, the Group of Seven (G-7, and later G-8) nations became an informal steering committee for the world economy. It remains to be seen whether the “quartet” of the United States, the European Union, Russia, and the United Nations that has coalesced to deal with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict can be effective. It is worth noting, however, that the “trio” consisting of the United States, the European Union, and Russia controls a majority of both the world's wealth and its military power.

In the long run, new kinds of world order that we cannot now imagine may become possible and desirable. But until that happens, the goal of American strategy ought to remain what it has been for generations: a world in which a handful of great powers sharing basic liberal values cooperate to manage conflict and competition in a global society of sovereign states. □

# What's Law Got to Do with It?

by Michael J. Glennon

**T**he Bush administration has come under heavy fire for turning its back on the Kyoto Protocol, the International Criminal Court, and other highly publicized multilateral initiatives. America is abandoning its traditional commitment to the rule of law in international relations, charge critics at home and abroad, and is recklessly bent on “going it alone.” *Unilateralist, hegemonic, imperialist*—barely a day goes by without such indictments being leveled at some new American policy. “We shall pursue our efforts toward a humane and controlled globalization,” French foreign minister Hubert Védrine recently declared, “even if the new high-handed American unilateralism doesn’t help matters.” Some worry that the United States is compromising the majesty of international law and its shining promise of a more peaceful world in the century ahead, while others mutter that the United States is taking on the aspect of an empire—and a few in America gleefully embrace the idea. “We are an attractive empire, the one everyone wants to join,” declares *The Wall Street Journal’s* Max Boot.

As a matter of historical accuracy, the talk of empire is ill-founded. The United States is not an empire, nor could it conceivably become one. The term *empire* implies more than simple cultural dominance or preeminent military power. It applies to states that *use force to occupy and control a group of other states or regions*. The conquered states, robbed of autonomy and political independence, become colonies, provinces, or territories of the imperial power. Taxes are levied, laws are imposed, soldiers are conscripted, governors are installed—all without the consent of the subjugated state. Foreign policy, including all military alliances, trade agreements, and diplomatic relations, is dictated by the imperial capital. Rome was an empire. Napoleonic France, 19th-century Britain, and the Soviet Union were empires. But *empire* simply does not accurately describe America’s relationship with France or Germany or Japan, or even with more dependent states such as Canada, Israel, or Guatemala.

Nor is the United States a hardcore unilateralist. It is a party to more than 10,000 treaties—probably more than any other nation in the world. About a third are multilateral agreements. True, the United States does not pursue its interests by multilateral means alone. But neither do other states. Last year, France rejected the declaration of the Community of



Many Europeans join this German weekly in sniffing at the “lawless” U.S. response to terrorism: “The Bush Warriors: America’s Crusade against Evil,” says the headline.

Democracies in which 106 other countries pledged their cooperative support of democratic institutions in emerging democracies. New Zealand in the mid-1980s unilaterally banned visits from nuclear-powered and nuclear-armed ships. Sweden, Denmark, and Britain, declining thus far to adopt the euro, are prominent—but hardly the only—examples of European nations that unilaterally resist full integration. Norway refuses to join the European Union. Until recently, Switzerland took a pass on membership in the United Nations.

**I**t is true that the United States has been ham-handed in backing out of negotiations without presenting alternatives. But in rhetoric as well as substance, the critics are off the mark. Their vocabulary is overblown, and their logic is distorted. The United States often has been doing what any other nation would do in its circumstances—placing its own national interest before a putative “collective” interest when the two

conflict; it just does it with less hypocrisy and greater success. And if as a result of this new tone in foreign policy some of the weaker, less workable elements of international law are revealed for what they are and discarded, the institution of international law as a whole will likely be strengthened.

Broad labels such as *unilateralist* or *imperialist* have little application to the way the United States and other modern nations actually behave. The contrasting notion that nations act—or should act—to advance interests of other nations is no more useful. In the real world, nations act to advance *their own* interests. They accrue power—sometimes power so great as to qualify as hegemonic (*hegemon* is a Greek word meaning “leader”)—and their power, like their interests, varies according to the realm in which they are acting. No state is unilateralist or multilateralist in every realm.

Henry Kissinger makes a similar point about the importance of different realms in *Does America Need a Foreign Policy?* (2001). There is no “international system” to which a single formula can be applied, Kissinger insists, but rather four systems, existing side by side. In the North Atlantic system, democracy and free markets prevail and war is largely unthinkable. In Asia, the United States, China, and other regional powers treat one another as strategic rivals; war is not inconceivable and is kept in check, in part, through a balance of power of the sort that prevailed in 19th-century Europe. In the Middle East, Kissinger’s third system, conflicts are most like those in 17th-century Europe, with roots that are ideological and religious, and are therefore less easily reconcilable. Africa is marked by ethnic conflict, dire health crises, and poverty exacerbated by artificially drawn borders and global isolation. In each of these systems or realms, Kissinger says, the United States, and other countries, must act differently.

**J**oseph S. Nye conceives of the several realms of the international order in somewhat different terms. He begins *The Paradox of American Power* (2002) with an analogy to three-dimensional chess. In Nye’s view, power is distributed among countries in a complex, three-tiered pattern. On the top chessboard is military power, and there a largely unipolar system prevails, dominated by the United States. The middle board is an international economic system, in which the United States competes with Europe as an approximate equal, while Japan and, increasingly, China exert significant power. The bottom chessboard consists of cross-border transactions—everything from electronic financial transfers to weapons traffic by terrorists—that no government controls. Nye argues that a nation will lose the game if it focuses on only one of the three boards and fails to notice the connections among them. For Nye, as for Kissinger, one label cannot fit all.

>MICHAEL J. GLENNON, a former Wilson Center fellow, is a professor of international law at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University. He is the author of *Limits of Law, Prerogatives of Power: Interventionism after Kosovo* (2001). Copyright © 2002 by Michael J. Glennon.

The international legal system is best conceived in much the same way as Kissinger and Nye view the political, economic, and military world—not as a single system but as a web of interrelated subsystems. The treaties and international organizations of the contemporary world occupy different realms, and the United States and other countries have different interests and powers in each. A nation that proceeds unilaterally in one realm may well act multilaterally in another. The use of force, human rights, law enforcement, environmental protection, arms control, trade and finance, intellectual property, migration control, and so forth all present different sets of interests—sometimes unique, sometimes overlapping, but all resistant to an overarching policy that flows from a single, comprehensive algorithm.

**T**hus, the key question in deciding whether to sign any particular treaty is always the same: Do the proposed restraints serve the state's interests? Do the benefits, in other words, exceed the costs? That is the simple test that every rational state applies when it decides whether to embrace a treaty.

Sometimes what is in a state's national interest is also in some larger common interest, as the NATO Treaty illustrates. And sometimes long-term national interest might argue for acting in the common interest even if a shorter-term view suggests otherwise (which explains why the United States has long supported European

integration even though Europe is an economic competitor). In fields where unilateral action is less likely to be successful, such as law enforcement and environmental protection, treaty agreements may make sense. Some things simply cannot be done without the full cooperation of others.

But acting for a perceived common interest—be it the Western alliance or the brotherhood of man—over a greater and conflicting national interest is irrational. No sensible state does so, and there is no reason why the United States should. Still, contrary to what some of the more “hardheaded” foreign-policy “realists” argue, this does not rule out carefully targeted altruism—such as sending U.S. troops into harm's way in Somalia, an action that saved thousands of people from starvation. Self-image is an important part of a nation's make-up; it derives in part from fidelity to historical ideals, from a willingness to sacrifice occasionally to be true to the national character. A nation whose ideals include humanitarian goals is perfectly justified in pursuing them. But in an international system where life is still nasty, brutish, and short, regularly placing a supposed collective interest over a concrete, competing national interest would only encourage unilateral “free riders” —

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states that are able to reap the benefits without footing the costs—and discourage multilateral solutions that demand fair contributions from all.

For this reason, it is sometimes irrational for the powerful to subject themselves to legalistic constraints created by a community to advance common interests, a point long recognized by political thinkers, including the framers of the U.S. Constitution. In trying to overcome this obstacle to union, James Madison argued that an assessment of *future* power would induce the currently powerful to submit to law. “The uncertainty of their condition,” he wrote in *The Federalist*, prompts the strong to submit to government. The strong “wish for a government which will protect all parties, the weaker as well as the more powerful,” he wrote, because the strong fear that they may some day be weak. But if the strong are not prompted by that fear—if they believe their power will last indefinitely—then they have no reason to accept legalistic restraints. The United States finds itself in much the same position today in a number of realms. John Ikenberry, a leading academic advocate of multilateralism, reflects this insight in his book *After Victory* (2000): “In general, a leading state will want to bind weaker and secondary states to a set of rules and institutions of post-war order—locking in states to acceptable patterns of behavior—but remain unbound itself, free of institutional restraints and obligations.”

In deciding how to act in each of the subsystems of international law, the United States must weigh at least five factors: (1) Is it able to work its will alone, and for how long will it be able to do so? (2) Does an authentic rule of law actually exist in the subsystem, or is its development possible? (3) Is the United States able and willing to bear the long-term burden of being the hegemonic power in that subsystem? (4) Are the benefits of hegemony likely to outweigh the costs if legal constraints within that subsystem are weakened? (5) Is “contagion” likely? That is, would weakening unwanted legalistic constraints in one area undermine constraints in another where they may be more desirable?

Hegemony, as these tests suggest, is in tension with the international rule of law—unless law is seen only as a club for keeping the rest of the world in line. The United States thus needs to determine what measure of discretion it will want to retain in each realm in the distant future and then work backward to devise a strategy to achieve that goal. So it makes perfect sense for American policymakers to think twice before committing the United States to long-term legalistic restraints. Proposed treaties are not holy writ; signing on is not some sort of moral imperative. The United States, like any other state, should approach any treaty offer with strict scrutiny, as if it were being presented by a crowd of carnival pitchmen. Reasonable people may disagree about the merits of a particular treaty, but merit must always be weighed in a tough-minded assessment of national interest.

**A**merican decision makers need to be farsighted in recognizing how international norms originate. Rarely do such norms appear suddenly in a treaty cut from whole cloth. More often,



they gestate over a period of years and evolve from informal practices into formal norms, from “soft” law into hard. An example is the UN Security Council. The Council did not emerge spontaneously from San Francisco in 1945. It descended from the Concert of Europe, the informal coalition of great powers that came together at the Congress of Vienna in 1814 to restore order to Continental affairs after the Napoleonic wars. Seemingly ad hoc coalitions such as the Concert can evolve into formally integrated institutions when states’ expectations evolve along with those coalitions, as they did in 1919 with the formation of the League of Nations. So the United States must be circumspect in improvising “coalitions of the willing,” and join only if it can accept the possibility that the “temporary” coalition might eventually take on the status of a more formal multilateral institution, capable of further circumscribing the discretion of members. Coalitions formed to fight wars—as in the Persian Gulf, Kosovo, and Afghanistan—all run the risk of setting precedents that, for better or worse, could congeal into future international institutions.

**A**t the same time, American leaders must be wary of the seductive notion that the United States, with its vast military superiority, economic might, and cultural preeminence, has discovered a Fountain of Perpetual National Power. No doubt it was easy for the leaders of 19th-century Britain or imperial Rome to convince themselves that their dominion would last forever; the Romans did have a run measured in centuries. The United States so far has seemed immune to the perils of “overstretch,” and it has not provoked other states to form the kind of adversarial alliances that have doomed many past superpowers. There is little reason today to fear that American power will wane significantly in the decades immediately ahead. But no one can know. Superpowers come and go, as Mikhail Gorbachev can testify.

The United States should manage its military, political, and economic power as an investor manages assets. Today it is sitting on a stash of power unparalleled in human history. Tomorrow that stash may begin to shrink—or perhaps grow larger. The United States always has the option to “cash out” and lock in its power by accepting legalistic constraints at a time when it can exert maximum leverage. That would be a shrewd move if the geopolitical future looked bleak—if the United States appeared less likely to be able to protect its interests unilaterally. But there is less justification for shackling the nation with multilateral chains in an area where the United States will be able in the future to advance its interests by acting alone. The use of force may be such an area.

During the armistice negotiations at the end of World War I, a hawkish U.S. senator pressed President Woodrow Wilson to justify his support for granting Germany a generous peace. “I am now playing for 100 years hence,” Wilson replied. America’s leaders today must think in the same terms. In some realms, America’s future interests will be better advanced by law; in others, by power. The test of American statesmanship in the 21st century will lie in its ability to discern which is which. □

# The Imperial Republic after 9/11

by Robert S. Litwak

America's global dominance prompts popular references to a latter-day Roman Empire. Transcending the Cold War rubric "superpower," "hyperpower" has entered our political lexicon to convey the magnitude of the United States' paramount international status. But though American power has never been greater, there has never been greater confusion about what to do with it.

The current U.S. foreign-policy debate—typically framed across a broad range of issues as the choice between unilateralism ("going it alone") and multilateralism (working in concert with others states)—is a reflection, not the source, of this confusion. The roots of the confusion lie rather in the persisting tension between America's twin identities, a duality aptly characterized by French political theorist Raymond Aron in *The Imperial Republic* (1973). The United States is an "imperial" power dominating and maintaining an international order whose key institutions and governing norms bear an indelibly American stamp. At the same time, it's a "republic"—that is to say, a sovereign state existing within a system of sovereign states equal under international law. The tension created by the two identities, which American policymakers can manage but not totally resolve, has important practical consequences. For example, should the United States act to uphold the global norm against genocide in a conflict region where its national interests are not tangibly at stake? Or, again, should it use unilateral force to prevent a "rogue state" from acquiring weapons of mass destruction?

The clash of identities now plays out in the transformed political environment of the post-9/11 world. After the unprecedented attacks on New York and Washington by Osama bin Laden's Qaeda terrorist network, Leon Fuerth, who had been national security adviser to Vice President Al Gore, commented that September 11, 2001, would henceforth be a demarcation point as stark as B.C. and A.D. in U.S. foreign policy. The occurrence of a mass-casualty attack on American soil by perpetrators originating from Taliban-ruled Afghanistan, half a world away, augured a sea change in U.S. policies, both foreign and domestic. Some political observers viewed the magnitude of the change as comparable to that of the readjustment of the early Cold War era. As Secretary of State Colin Powell observed after September 11, "Not only is the Cold War over, the post-Cold War period is also over." The latter era, ushered in by the collapse of the Soviet empire and the 1991 Gulf War, lasted a decade. It's testimony to what Henry Kissinger called "the infinite complexity" of international relations during the decade

that policy practitioners and scholars could characterize the period only through reference to the preceding Cold War era.

Yet the post-9/11 conventional wisdom that “everything has changed” and “the world will never be the same” requires qualification. In terms of its enduring impact on the American psyche, that horrific day is rightfully grouped with Pearl Harbor and the Kennedy assassination. The 9/11 attacks ushered in a new age of American vulnerability and exposed the dark side of globalization. A radical Islamic group whose idealized conception of society is rooted in the seventh century turned the hallmarks of our 21st-century networked world—the Internet, satellite phones, and commercial jets—into weapons. The increased proliferation of dangerous technologies and the existence of terrorist groups such as Al Qaeda that would not hesitate to use weapons of mass destruction raise the specter of a potentially worse mass-casualty attack in the future. There has been a chilling new conjunction of capabilities and intentions. As American society and societies worldwide adopt counterterrorism measures for our new age of vulnerability, 9/11 has an unshakable psychological and practical impact. And yet, for all the talk of change, the events of that day did not alter the structure of international relations. Indeed, the attacks led not to a transformation of the pre-9/11 international order but to its resounding *affirmation*, evidenced, most notably, by the emergence of a broad international coalition against terrorism. The explanation for this lies in the nature of the international order that was created after World War II.

American diplomatic history shows two contending approaches to international order, realism and liberalism. Each school of thought has its own long history and deep philosophical roots, and each offers a different answer to the most fundamental



*The view from the axis of evil: To Iranian cartoonist Touka Neyestani America's response to 9/11 looks like just another exercise of oppression.*

question in international relations: How is international peace to be achieved?

To liberal thinkers and practitioners, from Immanuel Kant to Woodrow Wilson, the key determinant is the internal organization of states. That gives rise to the notion that international peace can be secured through the global proliferation of democratic political systems; in the words of President Bill Clinton, “Democracies don’t attack each other.” In contrast, realists from Thucydides to Kissinger have argued that peace derives not from the domestic structures of states but from a stable distribution of power among states. The competing pulls of realism and liberalism are evidenced in the pendular swings of U.S. foreign policy. Thus, for example, during the period of superpower détente in the early 1970s, President Richard Nixon and national security adviser (and later secretary of state) Kissinger could not sustain U.S. domestic support for a realpolitik foreign policy divorced from core American values that promote democracy and human rights. Jimmy Carter subsequently encountered the opposite problem, when liberal idealism ran up against the power realities of an increasingly assertive Soviet Union.

The international institutional structure built after World War II reflected the influence of both schools of thought. Through the Bretton Woods economic agreements and the Marshall Plan, America envisaged an extended geographic zone of democratic, free-market states whose core would be North America, Western Europe, and Japan. The new institutions in the system, firmly grounded in a liberal conception of international order, became the keystone of our modern, connected world. They were complemented by an equally important security-alliance system that began with the creation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). The institutions in the security alliance were built in the realist tradition to address the paramount challenge of the postwar era: containing an expansionist Soviet Union. Writing under the pseudonym X, American diplomat George Kennan elaborated the containment doctrine in a classic article in *Foreign Affairs* in 1947. He viewed the West’s efforts to balance Soviet power as essentially a long-term holding operation until the internal contradictions of the communist society led to its “break-up” or “mellowing.” As the Cold War unfolded, successive American administrations defined U.S. interests beyond Europe and Japan (and most significantly in the Third World) in terms of a global competition with the Soviet Union.

“An imperial state,” wrote foreign-policy specialist Robert Tucker in *Nation or Empire?* (1968), “must have as its purpose the creation and maintenance of order.” By that definition, the United States, through its unique institution-building role after World War II, certainly was an “imperial” power. But that American “empire” was unlike any before. Looking to the United States for protection and economic assistance, the recovering European states outside the Soviet sphere willingly joined the multilateral institutions forged through American leadership. The consensual basis of these states’ association gave the postwar international order its unique character—and led Norwegian historian Geir Lundestad to characterize the U.S.-led Western system as an “empire by invitation.” By contrast, only the coercive presence of the Red Army held together the Soviet bloc—that “evil empire,” in President Ronald Reagan’s famous words.

>ROBERT S. LITWAK is director of international studies at the Woodrow Wilson Center and author of *Rogue States and U.S. Foreign Policy* (2000). Copyright © 2002 by Robert S. Litwak.

In 1989, George Kennan's prophetic analysis came to fruition. An aggressive and revolutionary Soviet state became a traditional great power that accepted the legitimacy of the international order. That transformation, which ended a decade of intensified superpower competition after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, required both Reagan's revitalized containment strategy *externally* and Soviet president Mikhail Gorbachev's commitment to political reform *internally*. With the demise of the Soviet threat, the chief characteristic of the post-Cold War era became the absence of a significant risk of conflict between great powers. The United States emerged from the Cold War as a "hyperpower," and the economic and military gap between it and the other leading powers—the European Union, Japan, China, and Russia—increased still further in the 1990s. The main residual challenge to international order stemmed from so-called rogue states, relatively marginal international actors such as North Korea, Iran, Iraq, and Libya that employed terrorism as an instrument of state policy and were pursuing weapons-of-mass-destruction capabilities.

**A**s striking as the advent of America's unrivaled international position was the response to it. Against the prediction of classic realist theory, no overt countercoalition of major powers emerged to balance American hyperpower in the aftermath of the Cold War. Political scientist John Ikenberry argues in *After Victory* (2000) that the explanation for this historic departure can be traced to the unprecedented character of the post-World War II international order, which encompasses a web of multilateral economic and security institutions in which American power is embedded and through which it is channeled. That unique quality of the "empire by invitation" has made American power more acceptable and less threatening to other states in the international system. The multilateral institutions and their underlying norms, codified in international law, constitute the core of what liberal internationalists refer to as an emerging system of "global governance."

The enduring tension between the realist and liberal approaches was evident in the major foreign-policy debates of the 1990s, though on the contentious issue of NATO expansion, the two schools promoted the same policy recommendation: New Central European members should be admitted. The Clinton administration regarded their admission as wholly consistent with its neo-Wilsonian "strategy of engagement and enlargement," which emphasized the global extension of democratic political systems and market economics. In addition, NATO's expansion furthered the administration's long-term goal of enlarging the U.S.-led community of democracies, an evolutionary process that did not exclude even the possibility of Russian integration. Realists such as Kissinger, operating from diametrically opposite assumptions, also supported NATO enlargement—to move the alliance's forward line eastward as a hedge against Russia's possible re-emergence as an adversary were that nation's democratization process to fail.

This liberal-realist cleavage also framed the post-Cold War debate on the crucial issue of humanitarian intervention to prevent ethnic and sectarian conflict within states. In keeping with the liberal orientation of its strategy of engagement and enlargement, the Clinton administration was increasingly willing to intervene in internal conflicts, as in Somalia and Haiti, to preserve or reconstitute domes-

tic order. Political scientist Michael Mandelbaum, writing in *Foreign Affairs* in 1996, offered a powerful realist critique of the administration's policy on humanitarian intervention, which he characterized as a form of "social work" that focused on "peripheral" areas not of vital interest to the United States.

The debate on humanitarian intervention was emblematic of the broader confusion about the purposes of American power after the Cold War. To Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, the United States was "the indispensable nation," whose engagement and leadership were essential to the resolution of any major international issue. But the nation's activism ran up against a more economical definition of U.S. interests in a world no longer focused on the global East-West competition. Indeed, in the absence of a galvanizing Soviet threat, policymakers in the 1990s faced a significant challenge in mobilizing domestic support for an activist United States. The title of a 1993 book by Richard Haass, *The Reluctant Sheriff*, captured the nation's ambivalent attitude toward its role in international affairs.

During the 1990s, the tension between U.S. indispensability and U.S. reluctance played out across a range of policy issues involving the use of force to uphold global norms. Robert Tucker's persistent question—nation or empire?—was recast in the altered international environment. With respect to the dilemmas of humanitarian intervention, the central issue became whether America would perform the *imperial* function of preventing conflict and maintaining order even when its *national* interests were not tangibly at stake in a particular country.

**I**n 2000, presidential candidate George W. Bush campaigned on a realist foreign-policy platform of returning to "a focus on power relationships and great-power politics," as distinct from the Clinton administration's perceived emphasis on soft transnational issues. The new Bush administration came to office concerned about the potential rise of a great-power challenge from an increasingly assertive China and hostile to the notion of domestic engineering encapsulated in the term *nation-building*. America's allies bridled at Washington's unilateral rejection of pending international treaties, such as the Kyoto Protocol on Climate Change and the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty. Embedding American power in international institutions may have made it less threatening to other states, but the Bush administration saw that arrangement as a potential constraint on the sovereign exercise of power in accord with U.S. national interests.

After 9/11, the Bush administration, whose statements reflected a conflicted attitude toward international organizations and treaties, rediscovered the utility of multilateralism. The terrorist attacks were directed not just at the United States but at the global system itself, which the perpetrators recognized as American dominated. Yet the horrific assault had precisely the opposite effect of what the terrorists may have intended: It strengthened and revitalized support for the global system. America's European allies responded with the first invocation ever of the NATO treaty's collective security provision. Even more significantly, the common perception of the threat posed by terrorism to their own societies and to the global economy pushed the United States, Russia, and China toward their closest relationship since World War II. In effect, the Bush administration

dropped its pre-9/11 ambivalence toward Russia and China. In an April 2002 speech that recalled the Clinton administration's strategy of engagement and enlargement, Richard Haass, now a State Department official, characterized the overarching concept guiding American foreign policy in the 21st century as "integration." China's accession to the World Trade Organization and the creation of a formal NATO-Russia Council were tangible symbols of the integration process. This shift in great-power relations, the long-term durability of which is questioned by foreign-policy realists, underscores the extent to which the 9/11 terrorism reinforced the existing structure of international relations.

But despite the essential continuities of the post-9/11 world, the attacks have recast the foreign-policy debate on two issues critical to America's dual identity as an "imperial republic": nation-building and the use of force. Although presidential candidate Bush expressed his opposition to nation-building and humanitarian intervention, the 9/11 attacks and the ensuing war on terrorism have blurred or called into question the pre-9/11 analytical categories. Afghanistan, where the Taliban regime was supported by Osama bin Laden's subventions, elided the distinction that had been drawn previously between rogue states and failed states. Afghanistan, in legal scholar Michael Glennon's nice play on State Department terminology, had become "a terrorist-

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sponsored state." The autumn 2001 war there, capped by the overthrow of the Taliban regime, has ushered in an era that emphasizes peacekeeping and stabilization.

The long-term role of the United States in what now amounts to a humanitarian intervention in Afghanistan by the international community is unclear. Some "mission creep" from counterterrorism to nation-building is likely. But what's broadly evident is that the United States cannot afford to be indifferent to the "failed state" problem, even in a region not considered of vital *national* interest. The notion that America should eschew nation-building in regions of "strategic irrelevance," as conservative commentator Charles Krauthammer has argued, is of limited operational guidance when *any* failed state can provide fertile ground for terrorists groups with a global reach. Although the United States cannot do everything everywhere to reconstitute failed and failing states, it continues to perform an essential imperial function in the maintenance of international order. Indeed, taking imperial action of this kind to forestall the creation of another Afghanistan may be a particularly effective means of tending to the national interest.

The attacks of September 11 have also changed the terms of debate over the use of force, the most consequential and contentious foreign-policy issue facing the United States. The focus on "exit strategies" that marked the post-Vietnam era has shifted as the United States wages a global war of unspecified duration against

an elusive terrorist enemy. This new war highlights the central theme of political scientist Joseph Nye's recent book *The Paradox of American Power* (2002). On the one hand, the Afghan operation revealed the extraordinary ability of the U.S. military to operate virtually alone. The military instruments employed in the conflict—from long-range transport aircraft and heavy bombers with precision-guided munitions to aircraft carriers and armed drones—exposed the gap, not to say chasm, in military capabilities that exists between the United States and other countries, including its closest NATO allies. On the other hand, to wage an effective counterterrorism campaign against a Qaeda organization that's operating in more than 60 countries requires unprecedentedly close multilateral cooperation, most notably in the area of intelligence. Such multilateralism offers an effective means of attaining American objectives, and, equally important, it provides political legitimacy for American actions.

**A**merican policymakers must weigh the tradeoffs between the utility and the constraints of multilateralism. As John Ikenberry observes, “Cooperative strategies that reinforce norms of international conduct do constrain the ways in which the U.S. uses military force, but they also make other states more willing to join the coalition.” Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld has baldly stated that in the war against terrorism “the mission determines the coalition,” not the other way around. That determination of the Bush administration to maintain flexibility of action was reflected in its decision not to seek explicit UN Security Council authorization for the war in Afghanistan and in its apparently reluctant acceptance of military units from allied countries.

The imperative of preventing another mass-casualty attack on America, the warnings of which are issued almost weekly by U.S. government officials, has transformed the debate about the geographic scope of the war on terrorism and the preemptive use of force. Proponents of American unilateralism argue that pre-9/11 constraints, such as the international legal prohibition against “anticipatory self-defense,” are nonsensical in an age when Osama bin Laden has said that obtaining nuclear weapons is a moral duty—and when he certainly has no compunction about using them against America. In his 2002 State of the Union address, President Bush identified Iraq, Iran, and North Korea as an “axis of evil” and stated that his administration “will not stand by, as peril draws closer and closer. The United States of America will not permit the world’s most dangerous regimes to threaten us with the world’s most destructive weapons.” In short, the president argues, to protect American society, which is uniquely threatened by Al Qaeda, the United States may be required by the exigencies of the new era to take action without the legitimizing cloak of multilateralism. Critics of this unilateralist approach respond that the pursuit of what is perceived as an American *national* agenda will erode international support for what the Bush administration has cast as a *global* war on terrorism.

In the post-9/11 world, America remains the indispensable superpower. But global terrorism no longer permits it to be a reluctant sheriff. As the Bush administration assesses the calculus of risk of various courses of action, including a possible war against Iraq, its greatest challenge is to forge a strategy for this new era that will reconcile the policy tensions endemic to an imperial republic. □