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 Oktyabraskaya 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.

Rome'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

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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 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."

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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. Triumphalist 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 adhesion 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.

But 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 mandarinate 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 superpowers.

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.

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

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

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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 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.

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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 sepoys 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.

The 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

U.S. Defense Spending, 1940–2002 (As percentage of GDP)

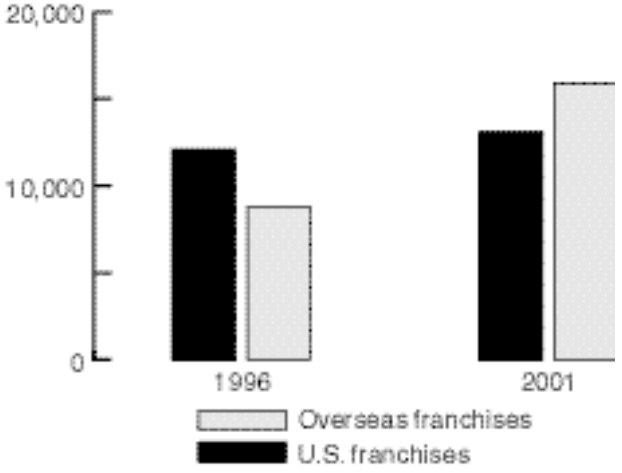
The U.S. defense budget will climb to some $379 billion next year, a 17 percent increase in two years. Yet in historical terms defense claims a small share of national wealth.

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
TOTAL	1,139	582	815	883	1,014	865	794	646

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 THE 19TH CENTURY AND THAT OF THE UNITED STATES IN THE LATTER HALF OF THE 20TH.

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-

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.

Put 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. ❑