



The Curious Case of American Hegemony Imperial Aspirations and National Decline

David C. Hendrickson

Is there an American empire? Will it last? These two questions haunt the contemporary period. In the last few years, roughly since the enunciation of a new national security strategy in President Bush's West Point address in June 2002, hardly a day has passed without a news item, essay, or book announcing, denouncing, or contesting the existence of an American empire. Legions of journalists, activists, and professors have investigated the concept of empire, compared it with previous representations of the type, assessed how far the United States fits—or breaks—the mold, and employed it as a term of abuse or praise. From this outbreak of fascination with things imperial among the chattering classes no consensus emerged: opinions ranged from the view that the United States is an empire and has always been one to the view that the United States is not an empire and never was one. These terminological disputes arose partly from the genuine difficulty of finding a commonly agreed definition of the thing itself, but more importantly from the common appreciation that the “e” word bore closely on the legitimacy of the enterprise. There is also no consensus on the second question. One side insists that the United States has entered a “unipolar era” likely to last for several decades, the other that “the eagle has crash landed” and that its economic primacy is at an end. “In the first decade of the twenty-first century,” writes the critic Michael Lind, “the Empire Bubble has succeeded the Tech Bubble and will look as absurd in hindsight in a decade or two.”¹

These debates over American empire merged and overlapped with longstanding disputes among political scientists over the character of the contemporary international system, the sources of power within it, and its most important vectors of change. Is the international system unipolar or multipolar, or some combination of the two? Does military power still rule the roost, or is the international system a complex multilevel chessboard with other and equally important sources of power and authority? In the current system, are states more likely to balance against or bandwagon with American power?

The debates over empire also merged and overlapped with longstanding controversies over the sources of decline and renewal of U.S. power within the international system, such as that prosecuted by the Yale historian Paul Kennedy and the Harvard political scientist Joseph Nye in the late 1980s.² Analysts working in this vein understood the American predicament in grand strategic terms and were attentive to the gap that Walter Lippmann made famous—that is, the potential disjunction in a democracy between the ends and means of national strategy. Here the focus of the inquiry is the relationship between power and commitments, usually informed by the precept that the nation must “maintain its objectives and its power in equilibrium, its purposes within its means and its means equal to its purposes, its commitments related to its resources and its resources adequate to its commitments.”³

Both these persistent debates, the one over the sources of power in the international system, the other over the quest for solvency in national strategy, were renewed and transformed by the Bush Doctrine. The emergence of explicit imperial aspirations in the world's only superpower was in its own way as surprising and transformative as the collapse of the Soviet Union. In the early 1990s, the United States was generally deemed unlikely to chase after any imperial temptations. Despite the impressive military primacy that emerged by default after the Soviet collapse, most observers had generally shared the image of the United States as a conservative power oriented to the maintenance of the status quo, more likely to withdraw from the world than to dominate it.

This expectation also conditioned many debates among political scientists during the 1990s. Neither the "offensive realism" of the University of Chicago's John Mearsheimer nor the "liberal institutionalism" of Duke University's Robert Keohane expected the United States to take up the white man's burden and seek through force a revolutionary reconstruction of Middle Eastern governments. Surely the United States would realize that it should content itself with regional hegemony and not attempt an impossible march to global hegemony, thought Mearsheimer. Surely the United States would appreciate the rational advantages offered by leadership in international institutions, thought Keohane.⁴

Bush broke out of these constraints and created a new reality every bit as revolutionary for world politics, and just as disturbing for conventional paradigms in political science, as the Soviet collapse. The new outlook was well expressed by a senior Bush administration official in a conversation with a journalist in the summer of 2002. People in the "reality-based community," the aide said, "believe that solutions emerge from your judicious study of discernible reality....

That's not the way the world really works anymore. We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you're studying that reality—judiciously, as you will—we'll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that's how things will sort out. We're history's actors...and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do."⁵ This statement subsequently was held up to great ridicule, particularly the bit about the "reality-based community," but there is little doubt that this senior administration official spoke a fundamental truth when he said that "when we act, we create our own reality," and that the rest of us are left to follow in its wake.

As the senior administration official suggested, the Bush Doctrine is indeed an imperial program, one that must be placed on the ideological terrain of "universal empire." Critics, it may be conceded, are perfectly irrelevant to its trajectory, but they may find busy-work in soberly addressing its prospects. I shall take up that rather inglorious task by examining the empire via a bodily analogy—inquiring into its mind (the coherence of the Bush strategic outlook); its arms (the uses and limits of military power); its legs (the sustainability of the Bush economic program); the rottenness or sweetness of its heart (the perceived legitimacy of America's justifications); and the energy imparted by its breath⁶ (the influence of political culture on U.S. external conduct).

The general thesis is that imperial aspirations produce national decline, and this in both the material and moral realms. Achieving strategic solvency and moral legitimacy, to put the point in policy terms, requires the rejection of universal empire. Despite the weaknesses induced or exposed by the imperial strategy, the United States also enjoys certain intrinsic strengths that make its position far from irretrievable if it were to reject the imperial vision. What was long said of Russia—"not as strong as she

seems, not as weak as she looks”—is also true of America.

The Bush Doctrine

The question—republic or empire?—has been one of the longest-running arguments in American history and has arisen in one form or another in virtually every war fought by the United States. It rang out in 1776 and 1812, in the controversies over Indian removal in the 1830s, in the wars with Mexico and Spain in 1846 and 1898, and on into the wars of the twentieth century, especially Vietnam. At no time in American history, however, has the transmogrification from republic to empire been so stark and compelling as in the administration of George W. Bush. Though there are various precedents for the Bush policies, especially in the presidencies of Ronald Reagan, George H. W. Bush, and Bill Clinton, no preceding administration put these together in so alarming a way. By marrying a revolutionary strategic doctrine with the unipolar dispensation created by the end of the Cold War, Bush brought the “empire” business to a whole new level.

The gap in military capabilities was in large part a simple consequence of the end of the Soviet Union and strategic bipolarity, but it grew in the 1990s due to the “revolution in military affairs,” creating the capability in U.S. forces to deliver precise and concentrated firepower in virtually every corner of the globe and prompting the operational objective of “full spectrum dominance.” The United States accounts for about 40 to 50 percent of total world military spending and maintains yet higher shares of world expenditures on military research and development. This technological prowess has created a large gap between U.S. and allied armed forces, making it difficult for them to function effectively together on the battlefield. The United States maintains an “empire of bases” throughout the world, largely exempt from local con-

trol. Each of its five global military commands enjoys escalation dominance against potential adversaries, and the vast resources allotted to these commands have marginalized the State Department and given them increasingly important diplomatic functions. The United States conducts a vast spying operation on the rest of the world through expenditures of some \$30 billion a year (with funds dedicated to these objectives steadily rising). It enjoys strategic nuclear superiority and dominance of the global commons. And it maintained this position by spending, in the late 1990s, only 3.5 percent of its GDP on defense. Even now, nearly four years after 9/11, it devotes only 5 percent of GDP to defense and homeland security.⁷

To these impressive capabilities, the Bush administration added a revolutionary strategic doctrine. Its innovations were four-fold. It broke from the Cold War doctrines of containment and deterrence, arguing that the threat posed by terrorists and “rogue states” justified a strategy of preventive war, which it called “the strategy of preemption.” States like Iraq, Iran, and North Korea, together with their “terrorist allies,” Bush said in his 2002 State of the Union Address, “constitute an axis of evil, arming to threaten the peace of the world.”⁸ Once war with Iraq began, notice was served on others that they might be next. “This is just the beginning,” one administration official told the *New York Times* in late March 2003. “I would not rule out the same sequence of events for Iran and North Korea as for Iraq.”⁹

The administration also argued that democratic government and the liberal ideals with which it was associated were of universal validity and that the United States has a right, perhaps even in some cases a duty, to impose such a government by force against tyrants. Though the administration insisted that the Iraq war was launched to safeguard American security, it was also continually represented as a noble cause. Never

in history, proponents said, had so many been freed at so little cost.

Bush also broke dramatically from the constraints of multilateral organizations, insisting that no foreign government could control the decisions of the United States in matters of war and peace. After it became apparent that the United States could probably get only 4 votes (out of 15) in the U.N. Security Council to approve the use of force against Iraq, one administration official said, “We will want to make sure that the United States never gets caught again in a diplomatic choke point in the Security Council or in NATO.”¹⁰ In keeping with this attitude, the administration had previously withdrawn from or scuttled a range of international treaties, including the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, the International Criminal Court, and the Kyoto Protocol on climate change. And why not? As John Bolton, the fox whom Bush nominated in 2005 to guard the U.N. henhouse, observed in 1999, “It is a big mistake for us to grant any validity to international law even when it may seem in our short-term interest to do so—because, over the long term, the goal of those who think that international law really means anything are those who want to constrict the United States.”¹¹

Finally, the Bush administration adopted and strengthened a doctrine of American supremacy first enunciated in a Pentagon planning document of 1992, but publicly disavowed at the time by the first Bush administration. This new official doctrine plainly avowed a determination to maintain indefinitely American military supremacy, holding that a peaceful international order was only possible if one state maintained absolute dominance, making any effort by others to overcome their own inferiority impossible and hardly worth trying. “America has, and intends to keep, military strengths beyond challenge,” the president observed at West Point, “thereby making the destabilizing arms races of other eras pointless, and

limiting rivalries to trade and other pursuits of peace.”¹²

Underlying these changes was the doctrine that the only alternative to international anarchy was a hierarchically ordered international system. International cooperation as an alternative to either anarchy or hierarchy was dismissed as the pipe dream of utopians. The world needed a rule-giver. The neoconservative columnist Charles Krauthammer gave a characteristically pungent expression of the new ethos even before the September 11 attacks. “America is no mere international citizen,” wrote Krauthammer. “It is the dominant power in the world, more dominant than any since Rome. Accordingly, America is in a position to reshape norms, alter expectations, and create new realities. How? By unapologetic and implacable demonstrations of will.” What America must do if it is “to wield imperial power,” wrote Stephen Peter Rosen, a Harvard political scientist and an important ideologist of the new ethos, “is to create and enforce the rules of a hierarchical interstate order.” Though Rosen acknowledged that “humility is always a virtue,” he insisted that “the dominant male atop any social hierarchy, human or otherwise, never managed to rule simply by being nice.” The imperial power must enforce the principle of hierarchy, Rosen insisted, “but is not itself bound” by the rules it prescribes for others.¹³

For most Americans, no doubt, the ethos underlying these changes—the animating spirit that gave it life and confidence—was nationalist in character. It arose from anger over the September 11 attacks, from the unbridled fear those attacks prompted, and from hitherto untapped sources of patriotic fervor. But if the American body politic reacted, almost reflexively, to the attacks by giving its support to war, the brain entertained a more sophisticated and far-reaching vision, one that gave an imperial dimension to American policy unmatched in previous experience. The substi-

tution of preventive war for containment and deterrence, the embrace of unilateralism, the hostility to international law, the rejection of international institutions, the stride toward absolute strategic superiority, the chiliastic tones in which democracy was held to be the only legitimate form of government—all this breathed an unmistakably imperial air.

Contours of Universal Empire

“Hyperpower, superduper-power, American empire, new Rome, unipolar world—all these terms,” writes the British historian Timothy Garton Ash, “attempt to capture the new reality of global predominance with no precedent in the history of the world.”¹⁴ Actually, there is a precedent for the mix of awesome capabilities and revolutionary doctrines now possessed by the United States. It lies in what the leftist critic Jonathan Schell calls the “hoary old nightmare of the ages, the always-feared but never-realized ambition to win universal empire.”¹⁵ Whereas “empire,” in its ordinary signification, means political control, whether direct or indirect, that is exercised by one political unit over another unit separate from and alien to it,¹⁶ “universal empire” means control over the state system as a whole. More simply, empire is ruling over other peoples without their consent, while universal empire is ruling over the state system without its consent. Both are exercises in domination, which is usually the key attribute that users of the label have in mind, but they are very different in significance. Empires are a dime a dozen, scattered all throughout human history; the quest for universal empire occurs less frequently but is the more important and world-shattering phenomenon.

The term “universal empire” is not in common usage today—“global hegemony” or “world domination” are more likely to come from the pens of critical writers—but it was in widespread currency during the long emergence of the European state system. The older term is useful because it

gives us imaginative access to a critique of the phenomenon that was once part of the American consensus and that speaks to certain enduring issues. Up until the profoundly interdependent and globalized age of the twentieth century, the term usually did not connote the literal domination of the earth, but rather dominance and mastery over a wide swath of peoples (who should otherwise, by virtue of proximity or interaction, form a system of states).¹⁷ Above all, it meant any situation in which one monarchy or state was in a position to give the law to the others. European diplomatic history for the last 500 years is essentially organized around the story of the successive bids for domination or mastery of the state system and of the countervailing coalitions those bids provoked in the name of the balance of power and “the liberties of Europe.” The contemporary quest for universal empire, however durable it proves to be, raises the same issues as these previous attempts, while outdoing them in the notable respect of being the first to actually be global in its reach.

The critique of “*Monarchia Universalis*” is of long standing. It was advanced by a remarkable group of Spanish writers, including Vitoria, Las Casas, and Soto, in the sixteenth century, and taken up avidly by a host of Enlightenment thinkers in the eighteenth century.¹⁸ Montesquieu, Vattel, Hume, Robertson, Burke, and Gibbon all considered the theme, and were as one in regarding universal empire as, in Alexander Hamilton’s words, a “hideous project.” The prevention of a situation in which any one power could give the law to the others was thought by the classic writers to be a necessary underpinning of international society, and they all looked with dread on the condition of supreme power to which the Bush administration aspired. Whether in Anglo-American constitutional thought or among the writers on the law of nations, it was axiomatic that any situation of unbounded power held peril for the maintenance of

both order and liberty. Such power would inevitably be abused; a prince that did not do so would be “the ornament of history, and a prodigy not to be looked for again.”¹⁹

Universal empire did not necessarily connote direct rule over subject provinces. Hamilton called the conduct of revolutionary France toward Great Britain a “copy of that of Rome toward Carthage,” aimed at destroying “the principal obstacle to a domination over Europe,” but he acknowledged that France did not intend “to reduce all other nations formally to the condition of provinces. This was not done by Rome in the zenith of her greatness. She had her provinces, and she had her allies. But her allies were in fact her vassals.” Juridical niceties, Hamilton was saying, could not settle the question of whether any state aimed at universal empire. Control that was not expressed in terms of formal sovereignty could nonetheless be practically effective and certainly threatening if it represented a bid for mastery of the state system.²⁰

While conceding that universal empire had a certain irresistible and siren-like appeal, the classical writers believed that the enterprise would inevitably recoil upon its authors. Universal empire was deemed not only a menace to others but also a threat to its possessors. Montesquieu doubted that Louis XIV, accused “a thousand times...of having formed and pursued the project of universal monarchy,” had really done so; but had the Sun King been successful in the pursuit of that objective, Montesquieu held, “nothing would have been more fatal to Europe, to his first subjects, to himself, and to his family.” “Enormous monarchies,” wrote David Hume, “are, probably, destructive to human nature; in their progress, in their continuance, and even in their downfall, which never can be very distant from their establishment.” Hume traced out, as had Montesquieu, a natural process by which aggrandizement turned on itself: “Thus human nature checks itself in its airy elevation; thus ambition blindly labours for the

destruction of the conqueror.” Rousseau reached a conclusion very similar to that of Hume: “If the princes who are accused of aiming at universal monarchy were in reality guilty of any such project, they gave more proof of ambition than of genius. How could any man look such a project in the face without instantly perceiving its absurdity...?”²¹

Of all these various bids for universal empire, the one bearing the closest analogy in ideological complexion to that of the contemporary United States is that which occurred in conjunction with the French Revolution and the wars that erupted in its train. It had it all: a strategic doctrine of preventive war, a revolutionary creed looking to liberate foreign peoples from tyranny, contempt for the society of states and its customary prohibitions, and a military machine that had, with the *levée en masse*, discovered sources of power hitherto unknown. The essential features of this colossal power were limned by Alexander Hamilton in the late 1790s, when he charged that France was making “hasty and colossal strides to universal empire.” Revolutionary France, in Hamilton’s estimation, had “betrayed a spirit of universal domination; an opinion that she had a right to be the legislatrix of nations; that they are all bound to submit to her mandates, to take from her their moral, political, and religious creeds; that her plastic and regenerating hand is to mould them into whatever shape she thinks fit; and that her interest is to be the sole measure of the rights of the rest of the world.” Here, in capsule form, are all the essential symptoms of the dread disease, the historic checklist for detecting the malady of universal empire. Altogether familiar to inhabitants of the twenty-first-century world is the charge that Hamilton brought against France, for it is the same charge now brought against America. He traced this spirit to “the love of dominion, inherent in the heart of man,” reasoning that “the

rulers of the most powerful nation in the world, whether a Committee of Safety or a Directory, will forever aim at an undue empire over other nations.” “The spirit of moderation in a state of overbearing power,” as Hamilton nicely summarized the point, “is a phenomenon which has not yet appeared, and which no wise man will expect ever to see.”²²

Faced with such great concentrations of power, the frequent recourse of many present-day observers is to charge a sort of venal corruption in political leaders, explaining events with reference to private interests (e.g., Halliburton) and presuming a thoroughgoing cynicism in the powerful. In the view of our Enlightenment sages, however, this view may mislead. Asked by Thomas Jefferson why all Europe had “acted on the Principle ‘that Power was Right’” during the Wars of the French Revolution and Napoleon, John Adams held “that Power always sincerely, conscientiously, de tres bon Foi, believes itself Right. Power always thinks it has a great Soul, and vast Views, beyond the Comprehension of the Weak; and that it is doing God Service, when it is violating all his Laws.”²³ An appreciation of this point is necessary if we are to understand the nature of the phenomenon and to see its possibilities for tragic denouement.

The new American empire is most often thought of as the heir to the British Empire, and there are indeed remarkable similarities between them. During and after the Cold War, the maps of U.S. military deployments looked “extraordinarily similar to the chain of fleet bases and garrisons” once possessed by Great Britain.”²⁴ The American task of regenerating the governments of the Middle East certainly recalls Britain’s self-proclaimed “civilizing mission,” just as it recalls the entry of British forces into Iraq in the aftermath of the First World War. American neoconservatives like Max Boot and liberal imperialists like Niall Ferguson want a suitably modernized version of the goals of British imperialism, which Winston

Churchill once characterized as follows: “[To reclaim] from barbarism...a fertile region and large populations.... To give peace to warring tribes, to administer justice where all was violence, to strike the chains off the slave, to draw the richness from the soil, to plant the earliest seeds of commerce and learning, to increase in whole peoples their capacities for pleasure and diminish their chances of pain....”²⁵ Finally, the United States has an equivalent to Britain’s “gunboats and Gurkhas” in the lethal combination of U.S. airpower and local ground forces.²⁶

But there are differences. The United States uses more ordnance in a single campaign than Britain used in epochs of imperial rule; American empire is above all distinguished by overwhelming displays of firepower in climactic battles of good against evil, whereas the British more often favored parsimonious uses of violence and did not demonize the lesser breeds they sought to bring within the law. America’s appetite for direct rule is far less than Britain’s once was. Even as America looks to the overthrow of a number of governments, it does not have a vision of itself as a colonizing power. As the Iraq occupation demonstrated, it lacks the essentials of a colonial office (though it may acquire one speedily after digesting the “lessons” of the Iraq experience).

But the most dramatic difference between the two empires lies in the scale and dimensions of military power. Even in the heyday of the “Pax Britannica,” British land forces were small; Bismarck famously quipped in the 1860s that if the British army landed on the Prussian coast he would have it arrested by the local police. Britain dominated the maritime sphere and was sometimes denounced as a universal empire, but its position in Europe was limited to preventing one state from dominating the continent, and indeed its special genius as a moderating factor in the European system was that it could help maintain the balance but did not threaten it. In its aspiration to

achieve “full spectrum dominance” in every theater and over every combat arm, the United States today presents an entirely different and much more formidable picture. As such, the really salient comparison is not to the overseas empire that Britain created but to the “universal empires” that a succession of kings and dictators sought to build at the center of the international system, and which Britain over the course of centuries was fated to oppose.

The Neoconservative Predicament

Despite uncanny resemblances, the depiction of the United States as making giant steps toward universal empire meets resistance for a variety of reasons. For one thing, the Bush administration has explicitly disavowed the imperial ascription. “We have no empires to establish or utopias to promote,” Bush said. His national security advisor, Condoleezza Rice, declared flatly: “The United States has no imperial ambitions.” In hearings to confirm her nomination as secretary of state, Rice pledged to “unite the community of democracies in building an international system that is based on shared values and the rule of law” and “to support and uphold the system of international rules and treaties that allow us to take advantage of our freedom.” At the same time, the administration has made clear that these commitments to international law and institutions did not cancel out or seriously constrain the Bush Doctrine, and thus it is difficult to take them at face value. It was, indeed, the conjunction of imperial aspiration and public denial, of acting and talking like a duck while pretending you weren’t one, that made writers employ artful circumlocutions for the thing that lay before them. The most apt designations were those that played upon the gap between profession and practice. Thus, the conservative thinker Clyde Prestowitz called it “the unacknowledged empire” whose recognition we are “frantically avoiding,” and the British historian Niall Ferguson

said it was “an empire in denial,” the “empire that dare not speak its name.”²⁷

The neoconservatives were themselves divided on how to handle this delicate problem. One hemisphere of their collective brain said they should come out of the closet and admit ownership of (benevolent) empire, but the other side objected heatedly to the imperial attribution. “How dare you call us an empire?” they sneered at liberal critics. One-half of their collective cerebrum insisted that the removal of Saddam Hussein was more important than international law, while the other half bristled at the assumption that the enterprise was illegal. One side celebrated the Bush policy as a “new unilateralism,” whereas from the other welled up the accusation that foreign states were yet more guilty of the sin and that the United States was still the kingpin of coalitions. In one part of their mind lay the firm conviction that the Bush policy is revolutionary and constitutes a dramatic break from the past, whereas in another was the answering charge that everything Bush did was prefigured by previous administrations, who never respected international law and thought international institutions were a joke.

Robert Kagan’s perspicacious study, *Of Paradise and Power*, also straddled this interesting divide. The brilliance of the account lay in the way that Kagan assessed normative commitments in relation to the power impulse. He skillfully wove his thesis that Europe and America had switched places, with European statesmen of the early twenty-first century, in their support for international law and institutions, sounding remarkably like American statesmen of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. But though Kagan was willing to explain virtually all of Europe’s attitude in relation to a psychology of weakness, he only went part of the way in ascribing America’s attitude to the psychology of strength. The logical implication of this reversal of position is that American statesmen should “feel power and forget right,” as Jefferson thought the great

imperial powers of his day had done. If the Europeans now sounded like Melians, should not the Americans sound like Athenians? But Kagan would not draw this conclusion. “The United States is a behemoth with a conscience,” he argued. “It is not Louis XIV’s France or George III’s England. Americans do not argue, even to themselves, that their actions may be justified by *raison d’état*.”²⁸ Though in Kagan’s estimation the United States inhabited a Hobbesian world, in which force and fraud were the two cardinal virtues, and in which there was no justice or injustice, no mine and thine distinct, this lawless anarchy was also represented by him to be a resplendent order, such that the rest of the world should offer gratitude to the United States for its maintenance. Was it an unrestrained Hobbesian anarchy or a peaceful world order? Kagan said it was both.

These internal divisions of the neoconservative mind are also on display in the differing emphases placed on the two great strategic innovations of the Bush Doctrine, the license given to preventive war as a means of thwarting the acquisition by rogue states of weapons of mass destruction, and the pledge to make it “the policy of the United States to seek and support the growth of democratic movements and institutions in every nation and culture, with the ultimate goal of ending tyranny in our world,” which Bush unfolded in his Second Inaugural. Here the ideological division is between “democratic realists,” who argue that the United States should only engage in democratic liberation when its putative vital interests are at stake, and “democratic globalists,” who take seriously the mission embraced in Bush’s Second Inaugural. Both are imperial programs, though they differ in detail—the one urging focused strategic exertion in the broader Middle East, the other fully sharing this objective but also intent on the end of history: the destruction of tyranny throughout the world.²⁹

The 18-minute speech setting the tone for Bush’s second administration provides evidence for both viewpoints, though the preponderant weight is in favor of the globalists. Bush acknowledges that spreading freedom “is not primarily the task of arms, though we will defend ourselves and our friends by force of arms when necessary,” which seems a bow toward Krauthammer’s democratic realism. This statement, however, does not exclude the possibility that freedom can be advanced through arms—the fire America has lit, Bush also says, not only warms those who feel its power but also “burns those who fight its progress.” The general line of analysis producing the conclusion that “our vital interests and moral purposes are now one” soars well beyond the threat posed by “rogue states” and rests on the proposition that the United States can only be truly secure in a world made wholly free. The Second Inaugural does not mandate the use of force for these objects, but neither does it exclude the possibility. The six regimes mentioned by Rice in her confirmation hearings as likely to receive special attention were Cuba, Burma, North Korea, Iran, Belarus, and Zimbabwe.³⁰

How far the American Colossus will run with its newly consecrated doctrines is the question of the hour, and I venture no confident prophecies on that score. Bush is clearly unrepentant, but also blocked by various exigent constraints. In keeping with many classical critics of universal empire, some argue that the bid will be checked by the rise of a rival superpower or some kind of countervailing military coalition, but this seems unlikely. In contrast to such an “externalist” or “systemic” theory, the more fruitful line of approach is an “internalist” account in which domestic weaknesses and contradictions are seen as the key variables that will drive change.³¹

The Limits of Military Power

It is upon the superiority of its arms that American empire rests today. The factors

that made for the preservation of Europe's plural state system from the fifteenth century to the twentieth century—geographic barriers, the relatively equal size of the participating units, the traditional maxims of European policy—have all been notably weakened in the contemporary period. Against smaller powers, U.S. firepower is irresistible in toppling regimes and forcing enemies underground, since it can destroy everything that it can see, and this superiority is especially marked when it can make use of allies on the ground who welcome aid against their historic oppressors. Whether the United States can create new political orders in places such as Afghanistan and Iraq is still an open question, but its destructive capacity is not in doubt. American strategic nuclear superiority will likely be further enhanced by yet more accurate offensive capabilities and new defensive systems, and U.S. domination of the sea and air lanes, and of space, seems assured for the next generation.

The emergence of a global military rival to the United States is very difficult to envisage, for the two most plausible candidates, the European Union and China, are unlikely to contend for those stakes, and Russia, India, and Japan are “hinge powers” rather than potentially opposing poles.

The EU will balance against American power, as it ought to do, but its balancing will take a constitutional and not a military form, consisting of verbal protests, refusals to “do the dishes” when the Americans make a bloody mess of their meals, and an insistence that Europe gets representation in decision making if the United States wants it to share the burdens. The EU is likely to exercise great influence on many issues in world politics, but in crucial respects the internal character of the EU forbids it from creating a foreign security policy and defense identity that would enable it to be a world power in the military sense. Even if it further develops its interventionary capabilities (achieving or going beyond the 60,000-

strong rapid deployment force), it is highly unlikely to form a military counterpoise to the United States. This sort of doing is contrary to its being as an association dedicated to the peaceful settlement of disputes and would almost certainly threaten its internal balance. Europe and America, in short, are condemned to a loveless marriage. Hating one another, but fearing divorce, they are unlikely to undergo a formal split. Even if this were to occur, Europe is most unlikely to play the role of the challenging military hegemon. Its challenge is rather in all the other dimensions of power.

China is a much more likely candidate as a military rival of the United States. In signal respects, it already is one. Here, too, however, it is difficult to imagine that over the next two decades China would achieve capabilities that would enable it to threaten war against the United States outside its near abroad or to stand in relation to the United States as the Soviet Union once did. The Taiwan question remains potentially explosive and could again become “the most dangerous spot on the planet,” but it is difficult to see any other Sino-American dispute reaching a flammable point. The United States will continue to enjoy escalation dominance but may lose military parity in the immediate theater (across the Taiwan Strait) as China builds its armed forces. China knows it would be madness to fight a war with the United States but has made it clear that Taiwanese independence is a red line, and it may be that Chinese popular opinion is even more hawkish on this question than is the Chinese state. In the longer run, it is evident that the management of China's rise by the United States (or shall we say the management of the incoherent American hyperpower by China?) is a political and military problem of the first order, and equally evident that historical precedents do not suggest a smooth adjustment. Given the compelling interests of both sides in the avoidance of war, it should not be beyond the wit of statesmen to manage peace-

fully this power transition, but war cannot be excluded over the next several decades.

The likely persistence of military unipolarity will encourage the continued use of force by the United States, but affords no guarantee that such uses will not meet with tremendous frustration. There is a kind of debility that attends the possession of so much power, for given sufficient time it will expand to the margins of its capability. What there is to use, gets used. This is the kernel of truth in offensive realism.³² The defensive realist may object that military power is most effective in non-use, when it preserves order by the threat but not the use of violence, but practitioners feel a steady urge to demonstrate credibility through the use of force. After the United States had blown apart the Taliban's rule over Afghanistan in 2002, it was seriously suggested that American credibility would be destroyed if Washington failed to go to war with Iraq. Was the war in Afghanistan an impressive demonstration of American resolve? Yes, but it was not enough. Did the United States enjoy overwhelming military superiority over Saddam? Yes, but we would not be safe until he was destroyed. The man from Mars, reasoning from eternal principles, might assume that a condition of overwhelming military dominance would be a source of security for its possessors, but such it did not prove to be.

Despite qualities that give its use a siren-like appeal, military force is a blunt and demonic instrument, often carrying states beyond where they want to go, and sometimes entirely incapable of achieving the mission it is assigned. It is one thing to say that we will bring democracy on the wings of a military campaign to oust a terrible dictator. It is quite another to actually do it. Though the campaign to oust Saddam Hussein was widely portrayed as "brilliant" and "flawless," even by critics who conceded that planning for the postwar was little short of disastrous, the two judgments, in fact, cannot harmonize. It was the very suc-

cess of American arms—their total breakage of the Iraqi state—that instantaneously produced the conditions of anarchy that so badly prejudiced the possibility of a successful occupation. There has been frequent criticism in the United States that the Bush administration has badly bungled the occupation, and there are a litany of errors it is alleged to have committed (such as invading with too small a force, being unprepared for the responsibilities and hazards of occupation, disbanding the Iraqi army, proscribing the Baath party). The deeper point, however, may be that there is no way to conduct such an enterprise well. The Iraq experience, rather than attesting simply to the ideological blinders of the Bush administration, may attest more directly to the limitations of military power as an agent of democracy and liberalization.³³

The response of the imperial intellectuals to such frustration is always: more effort, more staying power, more will. But what if the problem goes beyond will? What if we just don't know how to conduct such enterprises successfully, even if we had the will? Iraq has demonstrated with great clarity the old truth that it is easier to destroy than to build; all the "nation-building" expertise in the world will get you nowhere if a raging insurgency takes as its fundamental objective the prevention of reconstruction.³⁴

The unexpected duration and high combat tempo of the Iraq war have also revealed serious constraints on any future operation involving the use of large ground forces. The Pentagon's initial idea was to bring U.S. forces in Iraq down to 30,000 by the fall of 2003, whereas they have stayed well above 100,000 for the duration and reached 150,000 on the eve of the January 30, 2005 Iraqi elections. The most serious price has been paid by reserve forces, which have constituted some 40–45 percent of soldiers serving in Iraq. The result, according to the commander of the reserves, is a "broken force." The condition of the American ground forces does not preclude the use of

air or naval power by the United States; nevertheless, the frustrations of the Iraq campaign and the pinched condition of U.S. ground forces do foreclose alternatives that undoubtedly seemed attractive to the Bush administration in the confident days of 2002. In the curt summary of Boston University professor Andrew Bacevich, the sequel to the conquest of Baghdad punctured “the illusion that the world’s sole superpower has reserves of power to spare. It doesn’t, not militarily, not financially and not morally. Iraq has shown how narrow the margin is between global hegemony and imperial overstretch.”³⁵

Unipolarity, then, has its hazards.

Among them is a kind of inexorable pressure to continually demonstrate the efficacy of military power. On point is the maxim that became popular among critics during the Iraq war: “If all you have is a hammer, every problem looks like a nail.” Of course, people are perfectly capable of seeing that every problem is not a nail, but the realization has a habit of coming too late. Once committed, the imperial power cannot lose. It straps itself to the wheel, invests its resources in projects that will demonstrate its credibility, persists in enterprises that ought not to have been undertaken in the first place but which, once undertaken, immediately become vital interests whose sacrifice is unthinkable. It takes up enterprises, as Bush has acknowledged, that are difficult to achieve but would be dishonorable to abandon.

The most paradoxical feature of the American security situation is the simultaneous conjunction of immense power and acute vulnerability.³⁶ I do not think this relationship is adventitious. The nation has a true blind spot in understanding the effect of American actions on others. It wants so badly to believe in the rightness of American actions that it simply loses the capacity to put itself in the shoes of the other and to see things from his point of view. We understand that terrorist acts against our na-

tional territory stir us to anger and inspire us to fight, but we do not understand that the ranks of suicide bombers rise or fall in relation to our violent acts.³⁷ The theorists of overwhelming force (Victor Davis Hanson, Angelo Codevilla, Mark Helprin) are not altogether wrong in their beliefs: undoubtedly the hypertrophy of force in the Second World War created the necessary conditions for the successful rehabilitation of Germany and Japan. But this circumstance, so often invoked to justify the Iraq war and occupation, in fact shows the limits of the parallel. Considering the broader danger of terrorist attacks on the United States from scattered eruptions in the Islamic world, there is no way to use force on a scale that would achieve those sorts of effects, and it would be criminal in any case to try. Even in Iraq itself, the war simply paved the way for suicide bombers and significantly expanded the field of terrorist operations, creating the very danger the administration went to war to prevent, but which did not exist until it went to war. In the broader Islamic world and in Europe’s Muslim communities, the suffering entailed by the war played directly into the hands of Osama bin Laden.

The unnerving possibility is that America’s vast capacity for intervention, far from being a real shield against terrorist attack, is basically useless against the most serious danger that threatens us because it does not add to our capability to intercept small groups plotting terrorist attacks. Worse, the use of American power, with its brutalities shown every night on television to hundreds of millions of Muslims, may at the same time endanger us by adding to the likely recruits for terrorist attacks. Such are the ways in which “ambition blindly labours for the destruction of the conqueror.”

The Sinews of Economic Strength

Paul Kennedy’s *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*, published on the morrow of the great stock market meltdown of October

1987, has often been mocked for its failure to foresee the dramatic turnaround in the economic fortunes of the United States that occurred during the 1990s. Kennedy had assumed that America's relative share of world output would continue to fall, going as low as 16 percent; instead it rose to 32.3 percent (calculated in current U.S. dollars) by 2002.³⁸ He had worried that the budget deficits would continue to grow, reflecting a larger strategic predicament in which power and commitments were out of balance; instead the United States managed to generate budgetary surpluses in the late 1990s. He had assessed bleakly various trends that would be damaging "in the event of another long-lasting, Great Power, coalition war." The Soviet Union, of course, promptly disappeared. Instead of "imperial overstretch"—a yawning gap between commitments and power—there emerged a surfeit of power in relation to commitments, which in effect caused the latter to expand. In 1987, Kennedy worried that spending 7.5 percent of GDP on defense, which he regarded as the probable limit of public support, might not be enough to meet America's pressing strategic liabilities. Fifteen years later, writing in the *Financial Times*, he dwelt on the amazing fact that America's unprecedented strategic dominance could be achieved by spending only 3.5 percent of GDP on defense. Critics called it a classic recantation. Kennedy, of all people, had finally thrown in the towel.³⁹

The *schadenfreude* of the triumphalists, however, seems a bit premature. Though Kennedy was wrong in certain respects, he was undoubtedly right in the larger argument of his study. The proposition that military strength ultimately rests on economic strength is, after all, a sort of truism. Nor was Kennedy wrong to insist that the health of the economic organism rests on the need, faced by every state, to balance its military spending, its public and private consumption, its investments for the future, and its levels of taxation.⁴⁰ Most pertinently, many

of the features of the American strategic predicament that Kennedy pointed to as worrisome have now returned with a vengeance under Bush. In 2005, as in 1987, we might also look back nostalgically on the two decades after 1945, "when [the U.S.] share of global manufacturing and GNP was much larger...its balance of payments were far healthier, the government budget was also in balance, and it was not so heavily in debt to the rest of the world."⁴¹ After a rosy interlude in the 1990s, these adverse fiscal and trade imbalances now threaten the dollar's reserve status and pose serious risks for the world economy. America's habits—"rampant government borrowing, furious consumer spending and a current-account deficit big enough to have bankrupted any other country some time ago"—reflect deeply inappropriate behavior for the guardian of the world's reserve currency.⁴²

Inescapable signs of serious economic weakness emerged with the collapse of the stock market bubble and were exacerbated by the subsequent return of fiscal insolvency under the impetus of the Bush tax cuts and spending increases. The budget deficit, which was \$412 billion in fiscal year 2004, was in nominal terms the largest ever and fell little short, as a percentage of GDP, of the deficits produced by the Reagan tax cuts of 1981. The Bush tax cuts produced a federal tax take of 16.3 percent of GDP in 2004, but spending remained stubbornly high at 19.8 percent of GDP. "Official projections score the fiscal imbalance at a cumulative \$5 trillion over the next decade," writes the economist Fred Bergsten, "but exclude probable increases in overseas military and homeland-security expenditures, extension of the recent tax cuts and new entitlement increases." On current policies, as Bergsten notes, the budget deficit could approach \$1 trillion per year.⁴³ The unwillingness to pay for what it wants and to want only what it is willing to pay for is also apparent from the underfunding of the Bush Doctrine. Two neoconservatives, who insist that "it is

impossible to have a Bush Doctrine world with Clinton-era defense budgets,” estimate the deficit at \$100 billion a year, and it would be undoubtedly larger yet if another major war were to be launched in the next few years.⁴⁴

These constraints should not be misconstrued; they are political, not economic, in character. The experience of the 1990s shows that the structural gap between expenditures and revenues can be overcome without serious cost, and it is in any case difficult to believe that the U.S. economy would tank even if federal tax revenues reached 25 percent of GDP. Still, Bush's sharp reduction in taxes is surely significant. If he is not willing to pay for his own doctrine, who will be? One cannot know how the contradiction between big government expenditures and small government tax revenues is going to be resolved, only that it has to be addressed. Unless Bush reneges on his promises regarding taxes, however, it will inevitably constrain the substantial increases that neoconservatives believe are necessary to fund the Bush Doctrine.⁴⁵

American energy policy is also insolvent. The “false arithmetic” that Jefferson said was often employed to justify war is nowhere more in evidence than in the purblind subsidization of cheap energy as a kind of birthright, an unhealthy appetite perfectly symbolized by the gas-guzzling and road-hogging SUV. Enormous as the costs of this are—oil imports well over 10 million barrels a day, soaring trade deficits, yearly expenditures of hundreds of billions of dollars on military enterprises to secure access to Persian Gulf and Central Asian oil—the real costs do not get registered in gas prices or computed in national policy, quite as if an accountant charged with balancing the books forgot to count liabilities. The pattern, notes Clyde Prestowitz, “is to use as much as we want, produce as much as we can, and fight for the right to do both with whatever military muscle it takes.”⁴⁶

Yet more extraordinary than either budgetary or energy imbalances has been the growth of the U.S. current account deficit, which in 2004 reached \$666 billion and 5.7 percent of GDP. Bergsten notes that it is on track to grow to \$1 trillion, or 9–10 percent of GDP, assuming (what is very unlikely) no change in the value of the dollar. In its heyday, the British Empire exported capital from the metropole with as much facility as today the United States imports capital from abroad. In the second quarter of 2003, the central banks of China, Japan, and Taiwan purchased 60 percent of the debt instruments offered by the U.S. Treasury. It is not farfetched to compare this development with Britain's liquidation of assets to pay for the First World War, and it is pretty extraordinary that these capital imports are greater in size than what America spends on a defense establishment that lays claim to an unprecedented global strategic superiority.

The significance of the trade and current account deficits is at the heart of speculation about the future direction of the world economy and America's relative share of world output. The gap, though exacerbated by the Bush economic policies, is not simply a function of them—the current account deficit reached \$400 billion a year and over 4 percent of GDP in 2000—and seems, somewhat mysteriously, to be a defining feature of the age of globalization. Some say it testifies to the continued strength of the United States as a haven for capital; others that it is a symbol of the most profound weakness. Predictions that imbalances far less severe than those now existing would inevitably produce a dollar crisis have rung out since the late 1980s and, until recently, have proved incorrect, for the inflows of capital kept coming. The decline of the dollar (35 percent against the euro from early 2002 to late 2004) raises the question of whether the wolf is finally at the door.

The most arresting thesis regarding the significance of these imbalances has been

put forward by the French thinker Emmanuel Todd, who argues that the difference between what America makes and what it takes has become a kind of imperial tribute. From the amazingly productive and generous country that emerged from the Second World War, when it was truly the storehouse of the world, Todd argues, America has become increasingly parasitic, taking far more than it gives. Yet more arrestingly, Todd compares U.S. expansion since the end of the Cold War with the rapid expansion of Rome after the defeat of Carthage. Rome “collected taxes or tribute throughout its empire and was able to transfer to the central capital massive quantities of foodstuffs and manufactured items. The peasants and the artisans of Italy saw their economic base disappear as this Mediterranean economy was ‘globalized’ by the political domination of Rome. The society was polarized between, on the one hand, a mass of economically useless plebeians and, on the other, a predatory plutocracy.... The middle classes collapsed.”⁴⁷

This portrait of simultaneous “economic globalization” and “class stratification” in the ancient world is alarmingly familiar to students of present-day trends in the world political economy. But the parallel, though instructive, has its limits. There is, after all, a key difference between ancient and modern times. Whereas the Romans claimed their booty of foodstuffs, slaves, and goods by right of conquest, Americans exchange pieces of paper bearing promises to pay in the future for the \$600 billion trove of goods they take in over and above exports every year. The Romans could quell rebellions through force, but this method is not particularly efficient against bond traders and currency speculators, nor even against central banks. The expectation must be that these imbalances will be resolved by a severe dollar crisis, not unlike the monetary turbulence induced by the Vietnam War and the “breakdown of the Bretton Woods system” in 1971. In its incapacity

to make the choice between guns and butter, and in light of the insolvency that afflicts its energy policy and its balance of payments, here, certainly, “America is not as strong as she seems.” Multipolarity in the economic dimensions of power is as fixed as fate.

The Importance of Being Legitimate

If the analysis of American military and economic power discloses signs of weakness, the loss of confidence abroad in the legitimacy of American power is also quite serious. The pattern of the first Iraq war, with a successful victory setting aside the reservations of the skeptical, failed to emerge in the aftermath of the second. If anything, skepticism deepened. Approval ratings of the United States plunged, especially in two regions where public support mattered most: Europe and the Muslim world.

There is no simple way of articulating the complex bargains and beliefs that have underlain the legitimacy of American power. America, it seemed, was a reluctant superpower and had taken up its duties as a world power with the spirit of Cincinnatus, as ready to lay down as to take up the sword. America, it was thought, found no glory in dominion, but took pride instead in having subordinated its interest to a generous view of world order, one that claimed particular privileges for no state but that afforded equality of opportunity to all in peaceful pursuits. The richness of its political tradition, the way it had institutionalized the pursuit of power and subordinated it to law, fitted the United States, as no other state, to be trusted with extraordinary power. This was a judgment not only widely propagated by Americans themselves, but accepted as containing a good deal of truth by many others.

Confidence in that narrative has been shattered, and whether it can be regained is an open question. From the spring of 2001 to the spring of 2003, favorable attitudes toward the United States plunged from 20

to 50 percentage points in countries across the world. In Indonesia, where one government official said Bush was “the king of the terrorists,” approval ratings fell from 75 percent in 2001 to 61 percent in 2002 to 15 percent in 2003. The loss of public approval was no less evident in countries whose governments supported, rather than opposed, the American war. In Spain and Italy, whom Bush corralled into his coalition of the willing, public opposition was just as strong as in the “chocolate nations” of “old Europe.” Even in Britain, which alone among the coalition of the willing contributed significant numbers of troops to the Iraq war, disaffection within the political establishment—left, right, and center—was profound. In the estimation of the world, America had become a rogue nation. The acts of war its own public opinion deemed brilliant, just, and noble were seen elsewhere as clumsy, illegal, and reckless.

The attitude of American officialdom toward the legitimacy problem is complex. Certainly, it pays its rhetorical respects to the values embodied in multilateralism, international law, close consultation, partnership. This may be the tribute that vice pays to virtue, but it does throw a bright light on where the sources of American legitimacy are seen to lie by officials. The administration does not want to offend these gods unnecessarily, but neither does it wish to respect the constraints that they impose. Undoubtedly this poses a dilemma for the Bush administration, though it seems likely that whatever is deemed necessary for U.S. national security will trump what is needed to restore U.S. legitimacy. This is so whether preventive war or democratic liberation—or some weird mixture of both—proves to be the ground on which the issue is fought. It is very difficult to believe that world public opinion would accept as legitimate a preventive war against North Korea or Iran. Nor does it accept the proposition that it is legitimate to overturn a tyrant with external force. It takes the traditional

view, one of the vital pillars of the Westphalian system, that the right of revolution does not belong to outsiders. It accepts the maxim of Alexander Hamilton, that “in politics as in religion, it is equally absurd to aim at making proselytes by fire and sword. Heresies in either can rarely be cured by persecution.”⁴⁸

“Legitimacy” is part of what Joseph Nye means by “soft power,” which he defines as the ability to lead and persuade arising from “the attractiveness of a country’s culture, political ideals, and policies.”⁴⁹ But it is not quite the same thing. The dictionary defines legitimate behavior as that “sanctioned by law,” and most of the judgments bearing on legitimacy are registered in solemn treaties and compacts, such as those prescribing the rules by which force must be justified or those governing the conduct of military operations (to take only one subset of what is a very large and complex terrain). Neoconservatives like Robert Kagan want to limit the reach of international law as a restraint on American actions they deem necessary and virtuous, and hence they minimize the significance of adherence to law as a factor in bestowing legitimacy.⁵⁰ But here, too, the neoconservative mind is divided. One side says that legitimacy just isn’t worth a damn when it is provided by decadent Europeans and corrupt U.N. bureaucrats, so to hell with it. The other route—taken by the Bush administration—solemnly vows to abide by international law while farming out to its lawyers the task through skilful exegesis of bringing illegal acts within the law. Probably the core conviction—and gamble—is simply that legitimacy can and will arise from extralegal means. The Bush vision supposes that the United States can forcibly create new democratic regimes in the place of tyrannies and that the world will be forced to smile at the result, according to the process a retrospective but nevertheless real legitimacy. It believes that it can get the rest of the world to accept the proposition, in the words of the neoconser-

vative polemicist Victor Davis Hanson, that “‘imperialism’ and ‘hegemony’ explain nothing about recent American intervention abroad—not when dictators such as Noriega, Milosevic, the Taliban, and Saddam Hussein were taken out by the U.S. military. There are no shahs and Your Excellencies in their places, but rather consensual governments whose only sin was that they came on the heels of American arms rather than U.N. collective snoozing.”⁵¹ If that claim is good, the whole question of American legitimacy would indeed be transformed; at the present time, however, the tenor of world public opinion is decidedly against accepting any such narrative. American eloquence is unlikely to cure them of the conviction that external invasion is not justified simply for the cause of deposing a tyranny.⁵²

Does it matter if the United States loses legitimacy? What, after all, is it good for? We are all familiar with instances where the powerful escape punishment for wrongful acts and where weaker actors have no choice but to deal with the powerful even if they regard the latter as making illegitimate demands. It is nevertheless folly for any state to be careless of its reputation for lawfulness, probity, and candor. The clinching argument for its importance is the lengths to which states go to show that they occupy the high ground of legitimacy even when it is obvious that they do not. That constant activity to put a pretty face on motives that are unavoidably mixed attests to the awareness of political actors that they must contend for this prize and that abject failure on this score can only produce nemesis.

The Way We Are

These military, economic, and political constraints, each casting a formidable shadow, point to the existence of serious obstacles to universal empire, and might reasonably prompt a reiteration of Rousseau’s question: “How could any man look such a project in the face without instantly perceiving its ab-

surdity?” There are, however, powerful cultural forces that point in a contrary direction. By culture I don’t mean the appeal of Hollywood movies and the American way of life, but rather the way in which Americans typically reason about who they are, what their purpose is, and why their enemies act as they do. Though some have pointed to the quest for unlimited economic expansion as holding the key to American empire,⁵³ and others have seen it arising from the autonomous imperatives of the military-industrial complex,⁵⁴ the sustaining forces seem to me to be primarily cultural in character, arising from powerful conceptions of self-identity. It is the way we think about right and wrong, not how we add up profit and loss, that is the key variable.

The search for new markets and investment opportunities by avid corporations and 401k rentiers may explain the lion’s share of America’s global economic policy, but the infatuation with military power is owing to deeper, if misguided, conceptions of national role and purpose, akin to (and increasingly reinforced by) religious conviction. New Testament fundamentalism, overlaid by Old Testament righteousness, sustains the conviction of the United States as a new Rome whose mission it is to punish the guilty, establish absolute security through overwhelming military dominance, and revolutionize the domestic order of refractory states. That messianic and Manichean perspective makes us blind to the misgiving and fears of others, incapable of understanding how our way of war generates intense resentment and hatred, and as ready to misread enemy intentions as to view contemptibly the advice of friends.

There is a belief, not without some plausibility, that this is not the “real America.” The British commentator Anatol Lieven, in an otherwise harsh critique of these cultural tendencies, argues that “while America keeps a splendid and welcoming house, it also keeps a family of demons in its cellar. Usually kept under certain

restraints, these demons were released by 9/11.” Lieven does not exactly say that these demons are going to be swiftly restored to their former habitat, but his account does allow for that possibility.⁵⁵ The distinguished Australian analyst Owen Harries—like Lieven a sharp critic of the Iraq war and America’s new-found imperial ambition—is more optimistic. Though arguing that Iraq was a “misbegotten venture, wrongly conceived as well as incompetently implemented,” and that the war is doomed to fail in terms of its declared objective, the creation of a democratic Iraq, Harries nevertheless insists that “the outcome of the Iraq war will be a defeat whose good consequences will outweigh its bad ones because it will destroy illusions of omnipotence and restore a sense of limits, restraint and balance to American foreign policy.”⁵⁶ One hopes that Harries is right in welcoming a coming spell of moderation, but there is good cause for thinking his expectation much too optimistic.

Dreams of the Future

Will the “Empire Bubble” look as absurd in a decade or two as the “Tech Bubble” of the mid to late 1990s does now? Probably so. Are there good reasons for turning away from strategies of domination and repression and toward strategies of cooperation and reciprocity? Indubitably. Should we cast a skeptical eye on promises that preventive war will solve our security problems? We should. Isn’t it high time to put our financial house in order and address the various insolvencies now embedded in national economic policy? Of course. Ought not we to recognize that the restoration of legitimacy will require a return to the constraints of law and the practices of multilateralism? Indeed. Will any of these recommendations of the “reality-based community” actually happen? This seems rather more doubtful.

The neoconservative architects of America’s universal empire like the dreams of the future better than the history of the past;

they are in the business of shaping new realities that break out of the constraints that liberals and realists have identified. To go beyond the limits previously deemed prudent for the exercise of military power, such as were registered in the Cold War strategies of containment and deterrence, to load up the economic mechanism with debt on the theory that “deficits don’t matter,” to challenge the fundamental bases for the legitimation of force while asserting claims to eternal strategic preponderance, and to do all this with the conviction of utter righteousness—such traits seem inseparable from the present governing consensus. Though Bush’s revolutionary vision has already collided with unwelcome and intractable realities, it is boosted by a powerful array of forces that seem like permanent fixtures of American life. I do not know how far this doctrine will run; my argument is simply that the further it does run, the greater the risk to the nation’s security, prosperity, and international legitimacy. With the outcome of the clash between this irresistible force and various immovable objects highly uncertain, let us hope that the judgment America makes of itself in the future will not be that rendered by the stag in Aesop’s fable: “I am too late convinced, that what I prided myself in, has been the cause of my undoing; and what I so much disliked was the only thing that could have saved me.”⁵⁷ ●

Notes

1. Michael Lind, foreword to Emmanuel Todd, *After the Empire: The Breakdown of the American Order* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), p. xii. See also Immanuel Wallerstein, “The Eagle Has Crash Landed,” *Foreign Policy*, July/August 2002.

2. Paul M. Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000* (New York: Random House, 1987); Joseph S. Nye, Jr., *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power* (New York: Basic Books, 1990).

3. Walter Lippmann, *U.S. Foreign Policy: Shield of the Republic* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1943), pp. 7–8. See also Samuel P. Huntington, “Coping with the Lippmann Gap,” *Foreign Affairs: America and the World* 1987/88; and James Chace, *Solvency: The Price of Survival—An Essay on American Foreign Policy* (New York: Random House, 1981).
4. John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: Norton, 2001); Robert Keohane, “International Institutions: Can Interdependence Work?” *Foreign Policy*, no. 110 (spring 1998), pp. 82–96.
5. Ron Suskind, “Without a Doubt,” *New York Times Magazine*, October 17, 2004.
6. By breath I mean what the Chinese call *chi*—variously translated as life force or energy, which seems a suitable metaphor for political culture.
7. On the “empire of bases,” see especially Chalmers A. Johnson, *The Sorrows of Empire: Militarism, Secrecy and the End of the Republic* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2004). On the displacement of the State Department by the military commands, see Andrew J. Bacevich, *American Empire: The Realities and Consequences of U.S. Diplomacy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002).
8. George W. Bush, State of the Union Address, January 29, 2002.
9. Quoted in Steven R. Weisman, “Pre-emption: Idea with a Lineage Whose Time Has Come,” *New York Times*, March 23, 2003.
10. Quoted in Joseph Fitchett, “France Likely to Suffer Reprisals from America,” *International Herald Tribune*, March 15, 2003.
11. Quoted in Nicholas Thompson, “John Bolton vs. the World,” www.salon.com, July 16, 2003.
12. Remarks by the President at 2002 Graduation Exercise of the United States Military Academy, June 1, 2002.
13. Charles Krauthammer, March 5, 2001, cited in Johnson, *Sorrows of Empire*, p. 321; Stephen Peter Rosen, “An Empire, If You Can Keep It,” *National Interest*, no. 71 (spring 2003), p. 53. To similar effect, see Niall Ferguson, “A World Without Power,” *Foreign Policy*, July/August 2004, pp. 32–39.
14. Timothy Garton Ash, *Free World: America, Europe, and the Surprising Future of the West* (New York: Random House, 2004), pp. 84–85.
15. “Jonathan Schell on the Empire That Fell as It Rose,” August 19, 2004, at <http://www.tomdispatch.com/index.mhtml?pid=1691>.
16. For this definition of “empire,” see Paul Schroeder, “Is the U.S. an Empire?” History News Network, February 3, 2003, at <http://hnn.us/articles/1237.html>.
17. As Daniel Deudney notes, Enlightenment observers saw Europe’s resistance to universal empire as anomalous: “Other regions in Eurasia with comparable sizes, populations, and levels of material civilization were tending to consolidate into region-wide universal monarchies (the Ottomans in the Near East, the Moguls in India, the Manchus in China, and even the Romanovs in Russia)” (*Bounding Power: Republican Security Theory from the Polis to the Global Village* [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, forthcoming]).
18. See Anthony Pagden, *Lords of All the World: Ideologies of Empire in Spain, Britain and France c. 1500–1800* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995).
19. François de Salignac de la Mothe Fénelon, “On the Necessity of Alliances,” in *Theory and Practice of the Balance of Power, 1486–1914*, ed. Moorhead Wright (Totowa, NJ: Rowman & Littlefield, 1975), p. 41. For further discussion, see David C. Hendrickson, *Peace Pact: The Lost World of the American Founding* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2003), pp. 40–46.
20. Alexander Hamilton, “The Stand IV,” April 12, 1798, *The Works of Alexander Hamilton*, 12 vols., ed. Henry Cabot Lodge (Boston: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1904), vol. 6, pp. 282, 285. The extent of effective domination from the center in many once-existing overseas empires should also not be exaggerated. Edmund Burke noted that “the immutable condition, the eternal law, of extensive and detached empire” was to govern with a loose rein in order to govern at all, to respect the “chains of nature,” to comply, to submit, to watch time (“Speech on Conciliation [1],” March 22, 1775, *Edmund Burke on the American Revolution: Selected Speeches*, ed. Elliot R. Barkan [New York: Harper & Row, 1966], p. 86). Cf. the restrictive definition of empire in Philip Zelikov, “The Transformation of National Security: Five Redefinitions,” *National Interest*, no. 71 (spring 2003), pp. 18–19.

21. David Hume, *Essays: Moral, Political and Literary*, ed. Eugene Miller (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1985 [1777]), p. 341; Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, ed., Anne M. Cohler, et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), book 9, chap. 7, p. 136; Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Abstract of the Abbé de Saint-Pierre's Project for Perpetual Peace* [1756], *Rousseau on International Relations*, ed. Stanley Hoffmann and David P. Fidler (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 62–64.
22. Alexander Hamilton, “The Warning I,” January 27, 1797, *Works of Alexander Hamilton*, vol. 6, pp. 233–34. See further Claes G. Ryn, *America the Virtuous: The Crisis of Democracy and the Quest for Empire* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2003).
23. Adams to Jefferson, February 2, 1816, *The Adams-Jefferson Letters*, ed. Lester J. Cappon, 2 vols. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1959), vol. 2, pp. 462–63.
24. Kennedy, *Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*, p. 519.
25. Quoted in Carnes Lord, “Dreams of Empire,” *Claremont Review of Books*, August 31, 2004.
26. Bacevich, *American Empire*, pp. 141–66.
27. Clyde Prestowitz, *Rogue Nation: American Unilateralism and the Failure of Good Intentions* (New York: Basic Books, 2003), p. 35, citing Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study of Ethics and Politics* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1932), p. 294; Niall Ferguson, *Empire: The Rise and Demise of the British World Order and the Lessons for Global Power* (New York: Basic Books, 2003).
28. Robert Kagan, *Of Paradise and Power* (New York: Knopf, 2004), p. 41.
29. For the distinction between “democratic realists” and “democratic globalists,” see Charles Krauthammer, “In Defense of Democratic Realism: An American Foreign Policy for a Unipolar World,” speech given at American Enterprise Institute, Washington, D.C., February 12, 2004.
30. Doyle McManus, “Bush Pulls ‘Neocons’ Out of the Shadows,” *Los Angeles Times*, January 22, 2005. The omission of Syria from this expanded axis of evil is curious, since it has been the recipient of stern U.S. threats in the recent past. Though it has been a pronounced focus of the neoconservative agenda to induce fundamental change in Arab governments, no such regimes made the top six list.
31. For a similar distinction, see Charles Kupchan, “Life after Pax Americana,” *World Policy Journal*, vol. 16 (fall 1999). Kupchan argued that the United States “will not be eclipsed by a rising challenger, as is usually the case during transitions in international hierarchy. Instead, a shrinking American willingness to be the global protector of last resort will be the primary engine of a changing global landscape.” For further elaboration, see Charles Kupchan, *The End of the American Era: U.S. Foreign Policy and the Geopolitics of the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Knopf, 2002). Kupchan's larger argument differs somewhat from my own, but this distinction between systemic and internal drivers of change is important.
32. See Fareed Zakaria, *From Wealth to Power: The Unusual Origins of America's World Role* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998).
33. See further David C. Hendrickson and Robert W. Tucker, “Revisions in Need of Revising: What Went Wrong in the Iraq War,” *Survival*, vol. 47 (summer 2005).
34. For a discussion of these limitations on military power, see Jonathan Schell, *The Unconquerable World: Power, Nonviolence, and the Will of the People* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2003).
35. Andrew J. Bacevich, “Mr. Bush's Grand Illusions,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 19, 2004.
36. For frightening analyses of these vulnerabilities, see Graham Allison, *Nuclear Terrorism: The Ultimate Preventable Catastrophe* (New York: Times Books, 2004); and Stephen E. Flynn, *America the Vulnerable: How Our Government Is Failing to Protect Us from Terrorism* (New York: Harper Collins, 2004).
37. The most striking instance of this denial is that the relation between the first Gulf War and 9/11 should be a kind of forbidden topic. Because 9/11 was not a justified retaliation, Americans want to say that it was no retaliation at all. As a matter of human psychology, however, it seems indisputable that the 1991 Gulf War played an important role in the inculcation of that implacable hatred that led to 9/11. The use of American power in the region was simply unprecedented. For the first time, the offshore maritime power made a huge commitment on land, and used force on an extraordinary scale. The terrible

suffering to both soldiers and civilians spawned by the war was the soil in which Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda formed their hideous purpose, and it counted at least as much as—I think more than—their hatred of the Jews or their outrage over the defilement of Saudi soil by American troops. The importance of these visual images of destruction (especially Israel's 1982 shelling of Beirut and the 1991 Gulf War) is apparent from bin Laden's own commentary on his motives. It is the spectacle of blood innocently spilled that gives men the most direct and persuasive motive for spilling innocent blood themselves. We need to understand this about our enemies and not read them out of the human race.

38. Adjusted on the basis of purchasing power parity, the U.S. share of world output in 2002 was considerably smaller, at 21.4 percent. See Niall Ferguson, "American Colossus," at <http://www.channel4.com/history/microsites/H/history/a-b/American.html>.

39. Paul M. Kennedy, "The Eagle has Landed," *Financial Times*, February 2, 2002; Charles Krauthammer, "The Unipolar Moment Revisited," *National Interest*, no. 79 (winter 2002/03), p. 5. As the economic historian Robert Higgs has noted, published estimates of defense spending do not count a variety of expenditures—e.g., the costs of the nuclear weapons complex, military aid, veteran's benefits, and the interest on past defense expenditures financed through borrowing—that clearly belong in this category. Higgs argues that the real defense budget is nearly twice as large as the official published figures ("The Defense Budget Is Bigger Than You Think," *San Francisco Chronicle*, January 18, 2004).

40. See further Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

41. Kennedy, *Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*, p. 529.

42. "The Disappearing Dollar," *Economist*, December 2, 2004.

43. Fred Bergsten, "The Risks Ahead for the World Economy," *Economist*, September 9, 2004.

44. Tom Donnelly and Vance Serchuk, "The Military Needed for the Bush Doctrine," *Weekly Standard*, November 29, 2004.

45. On top of it all are looming deficits in old age pensions and health care. One study given great

weight by Niall Ferguson put the net liability at \$45 trillion, of which about four-fifths (\$36.6 trillion) consisted in health-care liabilities and one-fifth (\$7 trillion) the deficit in the Social Security trust fund. The conclusion that Ferguson and a colleague arrive at is that "the decline and fall of America's undeclared empire will be due not to terrorists at our gates nor to the rogue regimes that sponsor them, but to a fiscal crisis of the welfare state" (Niall Ferguson and Laurence Kotlikoff, "Going Critical," *National Interest*, no. 73 [fall 2003], pp. 22–32). This is extravagant. First, we must be very suspicious about the \$45 trillion figure, which includes far too much in the way of pure guesswork and absurd extrapolations over a 75-year period to be useful. Second, President Clinton showed that there was a way to overcome the budgetary insolvency, and the methods he used might also be employed to address the imbalances in pensions and health care. Let us not confuse incapacity to address these deficits with the difficulty, admittedly onerous, of reaching consensus on how to do so. Third, Europe, Japan, China, and Russia also face profound demographic imbalances that in some respects are even more acute than those of the United States. It is thus improper to attribute much weight to this factor when speculating about the future distribution of world power.

46. Prestowitz, *Rogue Nation*, p. 105.

47. Todd, *After the Empire*, pp. 61–62.

48. *The Federalist*, ed. Jacob E. Cooke (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1961), no. 1, p. 5.

49. Joseph S. Nye, Jr., *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2004).

50. Robert Kagan, "America's Crisis of Legitimacy," *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 83 (March/April 2004). See also Robert W. Tucker and David C. Hendrickson, "The Sources of American Legitimacy," *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 83 (November/December 2004), and the subsequent exchange, Kagan, "A Matter of Record," *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 84 (January/February 2005), and Tucker and Hendrickson, "The Flip Side of the Record," *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 84 (March/April 2005).

51. Victor Davis Hanson, "Cracked Icons: Why the Left Has Lost Credibility," *National Review Online*, December 17, 2004.

52. Despite Bush's invocation of the Founding Fathers as sanctioning this enterprise, it was settled doctrine among them that going to war for the sake of imposing one set of political institutions on another people was an illegitimate exercise of force. Bush cites the Declaration of Independence to justify his view that the United States is entitled to revolutionize foreign tyrannies. But the self-evident truths of the Declaration—that all men are created equal and are endowed by the Creator with natural rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness—did not justify, for the author of the Declaration, the proposition that foreign states had any right to revolutionize any existing political order, even a tyrannical one. This was contrary to “the law of nature and nations,” which granted to every people the right to determine their own institutions. Thus Jefferson, expressing the hope that the governments of South America would adopt republican forms, nevertheless insisted that “they have the right, and we none, to choose for

themselves.” Some such doctrine—reinforced by the baleful experience of nineteenth-century European imperialism and the destructiveness of twentieth-century war—continues to express a basic consensus in most of the world.

53. See Bacevich, *American Empire*, for a recent articulation of this view, which he associates with Charles Beard and William Appleman Williams.

54. The most chilling portrait is Chalmers Johnson, *Sorrows of Empire*.

55. Anatol Lieven, *America Right or Wrong: An Anatomy of American Nationalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 1.

56. Owen Harries, “Iraq Is the Failure the US Had to Have,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, January 7, 2005.

57. Aesop, “The Stag Looking into the Water,” in *Stories and Poems for Extremely Intelligent Children of All Ages*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Scribner, 2001), p. 225.