

The Emperor Wore Cowboy Boots

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Why does it matter if the United States is an empire in any objectively definable sense? All this academic and political pundit hand-wringing, over whether the United States should technically be labeled an empire or not, seems oddly out of step with the sorts of egregious foreign policy behaviors the United States engages in on a daily basis. Yet the words we use to describe something do matter a great deal to what we see and how we act in the world. In this paper, I argue that the closer one looks at the debate over the empire designation, the more one begins to see an underlying dynamic of political self-delusion that is endemic to the American power project. America wields enormous power that affects the daily lives of people around the globe, but like a schoolchild on the playground it does not like to be called names. The extent to which political observers participate in this obfuscation is an interesting topic in its own right, as it underscores how name-calling is a political act in itself.

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Why does it matter if the United States is an empire in any objectively definable sense? What difference does it make whether it is called a superpower, an empire, or some other term meant to suggest a powerful entity that rules over others? As a neoclassical realist, I tend to prefer the word “power” somewhere in the label, but I have no personal stake in whether we call it a great power, a superpower, an empire, an elephant, or (as many political pundits prefer) a sheriff. It is still a very large elephant in a china shop, and its trunk continues to smash things regardless of what we prefer to call it. All this academic and political pundit hand-wringing, over whether the United States should technically be labeled as an empire or not, seems oddly out of step with the sorts of egregious foreign policy behaviors the United States engages in on a daily basis.

Except, of course, that the words we use to describe something do matter a great deal to what we see and how we act in the world. As Dan Nexon has warned in his symposium contribution (2008:302), “designating the United States as an ‘empire’ only matters if it leads us to think differently about its political dynamics.” In this paper, I argue that the closer one looks at the debate over the designation, the more one begins to see an underlying dynamic of political self-delusion that is endemic to the American power project. America wields enormous power that affects the daily lives of people around the globe, but like a school child on the playground it does not like to be called names. The extent to which political observers participate in this obfuscation is an interesting topic in its own right. Thus, it matters a great deal whether we call the United States an empire and its behavior imperialistic, not because it is possible to arrive at some objectively truthful standard for designating such things (which will then allow us to predict and/or shape the future), but because name-calling is a political act in itself.

Empire Sighted Off the Starboard Bow

As the contributions to this symposium indicate, there has been quite a debate raging over the American imperial designation. This debate has been played out in the pages of scholarly journals, books, newspapers, magazines, and government documents, and it has proceeded along familiar social scientific lines.¹ That is, an ideal definition is postulated, usually based on a list of characteristics typical of historical empires. The “facts” of United States behavior and its attributes are then compared with the definition to determine whether the United States qualifies as such. Debate then ensues over whether the definition was correct, what exactly the facts are, and whether the facts actually fit the definition. This rapidly becomes an exercise without end, as how one defines an empire determines whether one thinks the United States is an empire, and vice versa, and it tends to evoke an image of IR scholars on a whaling ship, rushing from side to side looking for that elusive whale in the water, but unable to decide among themselves whether what they have subsequently hauled up and butchered on the deck was actually a whale or not. This sort of analytical exercise ignores how, as Stefano Guzzini (2007:23) has observed about the concept of power itself, ideas are always embedded in meta-theoretical (and hence political) contexts and so “concepts cannot be neutral,” or, as Linda Bishai (2004:54) puts it, “the whole point of contested concepts is that they have histories and so resist definition.” By insisting upon studying and debating the concept of empire as an ideal-type, the larger theoretical, political, and historical context within which the term is being deployed is entirely ignored.

It would be possible to avoid analytical circularity by adopting a higher degree of self-reflexivity and examining political contexts head-on. Preferred definitions could be compared and contrasted with something radically different, such as Historical Materialism, in which the term empire is a real signifier for more than power projection and where there is a specific sort of relationship between capitalism, states, and societies that typical power analyses do not capture. In this sense, Richard Saul’s contribution to this symposium is on firmer analytical ground, because it is concerned not just with an “objective” definition and attendant behaviors but with the entire political, economic, and social context of empire.² Hence it provides a real contrast to the assumed but typically unstated political context of most empire definitions and discussions. Unfortunately the compliment is never returned. Despite the oft-noted, chagrined observation that Marxists have been discussing the concept of “empire” all along, the debate over whether the United States is an empire does not actually engage with that literature or perspective. It simply ignores it, because the empire debate cares little about its own political context.

The debate over whether the United States is an empire revolves instead around the extremely narrow issue of current American foreign policy behavior. More specifically, it has been prompted by the ascendancy of neo-conservative (neo-con) thinking in American foreign policy after 9/11 and America’s 2003 invasion of Iraq. America is once again debating its imperial label, just as it had during earlier periods of interventionist American foreign policy, as David Lake points out.³ In other words, the term is again being evoked to suggest, explain, justify, or criticize U.S. military conquest, its forced imposition of preferences, its sheer arrogance, and the attendant follies. While debate participants disagree over whether the United States should be labeled an empire, there is almost

¹For reviews of this debate, see Nexon and Wright (2007); O’Reilly and Renfro (2007).

²See also Callinicos (2002); Colás and Saull (2005); Harvey (2003); Saull (2004).

³For earlier debates, see Aron (1982); Sumner (1899); Tucker (1968); and Tucker and Hendrickson (1992).

universal agreement that the United States *does* engage in imperial practice and that its 2003 Iraqi invasion qualifies as such. What has prompted this current debate, then, is concern over whether recent practices of imperialism make the United States an empire in some sort of analytically objective or factual sense.

All of this generates a certain measure of frustration from a realist perspective. The term “empire” is meant to denote something more than merely great power, yet the behaviors being discussed look remarkably familiar. Of course great powers act imperialistically, so why exactly do we need to debate a new term for such behaviors? After all, isn’t this what great powers do? Great powers use their power to take what they want, with force if necessary. They seek to impose their preferences. They are not benevolent, even though they might talk as if they were. They do what they want because it suits them, not anyone else. They cloak their greed and depravity in moral justifications and things like positive law. And they are scary as hell for anyone in their way. So why should we be surprised if the United States, as a great power, acts just like any great power? This is Paul Kennedy’s (1987) “Rise and Fall of Great Powers,” John Mearsheimer’s (1991) “expansionist power,” Stephen Krasner’s (1999) “organized hypocrisy,” and realist unipolarity in general. What, then, is the term “empire” supposed to capture that the term “great power” does not already?

But this sort of dismissive realist rebuttal misses the larger theoretical and political context as well. It is not that there is some sort of objectively better term to use in describing U.S. current and future behavior. It is that people care about the terms they use, even when they are referring to the same foreign policy behaviors and outcomes. The terms reflect what we normatively assume and are comfortable with, and the terms help shape how we think about those things now and in the future. Hence it matters whether we call it a great power, an empire, a whale, an elephant, or a sheriff, not because the stuff we have hauled up on the deck is any different, but because we are more comfortable butchering some ideas and not others. Even if the stuff on the deck is just plain blubber, calling it a “whale” as one butchers it is very different from calling it a “sheriff” or a “son.” Similarly some words are nurtured not because they tell us anything objectively different from what we already knew, but because they evoke normative notions that we like or prefer.

In this regard, Niall Ferguson (2003:64) has observed that American IR scholars and analysts tend to chose alternative words for what is arguably the same imperial behavior, words such as “unipolarity,” “great power,” “superpower,” or “hegemon.” In contrast to the American empire debate, there has been little political and scholarly debate over whether it is appropriate to characterize the United States as a “power” both during and after the Cold War. Instead much of the debate about the “power” label has revolved around its qualifiers. Is the United States a “great” or “super” or the “only” power relative to others? Could it be, as Eliot Cohen (2004) suggests, a “hyper” power? Or is it a (gasp!) “declining” power?

Similarly the debate over the term “hegemon” revolved around whether such an entity was necessary to the proper functioning of a liberal capitalist world order. The debate assumed that the United States could be labeled a hegemon for all intents and purposes and was more concerned with whether the United States still occupied this sainted place in the cosmos after the 1970s.⁴ If American political scholars and pundits have relatively easily accepted that the United States is a “power” or “hegemon,” why do they angst over the term “empire”?

⁴The literature on hegemonic stability theory is vast, but some representative pieces include Chase-Dunn et al. (1994); Gilpin (1987); Grunberg (1990); Ikenberry (2004); Keohane (1984); Kindleberger (1981); Lake (1993); and Strange (1987).

What is it about the American political context that evokes debate when the United States is called an “empire,” even though the behaviors under scrutiny are hardly novel and have already been subjected to considerable analytical and political discussion?

If You’ve Got It, Don’t Flaunt It

Part of the answer to these questions lies in the neo-con foreign policy that has prompted the current period of imperial self-examination. The neo-cons unsettle not only because they pursue policies that kill a lot of people, but also because they openly embrace imperial ideas. Michael Cox (2004:589) notes that “in a country where ‘one of the central themes’ in orthodox discourse had always been that there was no such thing as an American Empire,” the ascendancy of the neo-cons to positions of political power and influence was a “stunning development.”⁵ Although the United States remains an empire in denial at official levels, Niall Ferguson (2003:64) notes that a number of neo-con political pundits (such as Max Boot, Thomas Donnelly, Robert Kaplan, and Charles Krauthammer) “relish the idea of a U.S. imperium.”⁶ In fact, in answer to the question, is the United States an imperial power, they have tended to answer enthusiastically, “Sure, why not?” and “Let us have more of it.”⁷

To some extent, then, the term “empire” is guilt by association for those who dislike neo-con foreign policy (see, e.g., Ikenberry 2004 or Nye 2004a). Rejecting the former is a way of also rejecting the latter, and in this sense there is a very clear link between political practice and theoretical debates over the imperial concept itself. Yet the actual foreign policy behaviors over which so much debate is occurring do not seem all that out of character for the United States. After all, the United States has been a great power since at least the 1940s and great powers act imperial. Anyone who has ever studied U.S. foreign policy historically knows that it has *never* shied away from using military force to get what it wants (Cox 2004; Bacevich 2002; Ignatieff 2003a). In fact, that seems to be its favored *modus operandi*, even when the use of military force or personnel makes less than efficient sense for its long-term, strategic goals and interests. As Michael Ignatieff (2003a:7) bluntly puts it, “interventions are popular and they remain popular even if American soldiers die.”

Neo-conservatives could hardly have implemented their overt, aggressive, preemptive policies if there were not American institutional and discursive structures in place which legitimize the use of force for anything deemed to be in America’s “national interest.” True, it took the events of 9/11 to allow the neo-cons a window of opportunity into which they enthusiastically climbed (Cox 2004:597). But it was relatively easy for neo-cons to climb in and implement their imperial vision, even in a nation-state that prides itself in a “checks and balances” system designed to prevent the imperial exercise of power. Despite the availability of ample public evidence that questioned their motives and assumptions, the neo-con insistence that Iraq had to be invaded was supported at the time by most government agencies and the American public in general which, on the eve of the invasion, supported the venture by 76% (Secunda and Moran 2007, 156).

⁵Alternatively, Daniel Green (2005:235) argues that “what looks like liberal imperialism today is just an overbearing, aggressive ‘agentic’ phase of a liberal international order that has been unfolding for sometime.”

⁶So too does Vice-President Dick Cheney, whose 2003 Christmas Card quoted Benjamin Franklin: “And if a sparrow cannot fall to the ground without His notice, is it probable that an Empire can rise without His aid?” (Mann 2004:632).

⁷The first quote is Christopher Hitchens (cited in Cox 2004:598). The second is Dinesh D’Souza (cited in Ferguson 2004:5).

Although it is easy in hindsight to attribute such support to an innocent, peace-loving American public being duped by its nefarious leaders, at the time there were quite a number of brave souls who were willing to publicly object and provide evidence that contradicted administration claims. How were these individuals and this evidence treated by the American public, the media, most government agencies, and the administration in the months leading up to the 2003 invasion? They were systematically discredited, labeled unpatriotic, even dangerous, as “the land of the free” gleefully participated in the patriotic drubbing of dissenting voices and evidence. That this was the reaction to war dissentation is not an unusual event in America politics. In their comprehensive study of America’s march to war, Eugene Secunda and Terence Moran (2007:181–182) note that “there is considerable historical evidence” that “Americans really like going to war” and that “they consistently embrace the war option without much reflection to a greater degree than the citizens of other countries.”

Studies of the American media have also documented a consistent public preference for foreign policy new-stories involving violence, conflict, and solvable problems (as opposed to stories that involve intractable problems and hence evoke “powerlessness”) (Powlick and Katz 1998:36–40). Americans respond to hawkish policies and patriotic rhetoric that stoke security fears and promise action against our enemies (Campbell 1992, 1996; Lieven 2005; Lifton 2003a,b). Certainly leaders have become more adept at encouraging this preference, with the advent of new media technologies and marketing techniques. Yet numerous institutions and processes within America, including (to name some of the more obvious) its educational systems, religious organizations, and popular culture outlets (television, sporting events, music lyrics, etc) reinforce this preference on a daily basis. Thus, “from their earliest history, up to the present War on Terror, American have found motivation and redemption in the belief that ‘some men need killing,’ and ‘some nations need defeating’” (Secunda and Moran 2007:4). It has always been relatively easy for Americans to march off to war if they are presented with a common enemy to vanquish as a result.

The neo-cons did not come from Mars, then, they came from America, and America has been engaged with its own military power projection since its inception. As Michael Cox (2004:591) has observed, “Our ‘new’ imperialists may have been bold” and “they certainly are controversial. Nevertheless, they stand at the end of a long line of thinkers and policy makers who have never deviated from the simple proposition that once announced, the American century was here for ever.” Indeed, even if they disagree with neo-con decisions regarding Iraq, most American political scholars seem to have no problem accepting that the United States should use its power to obtain its interests. G. John Ikenberry (2004:620) asserts, for example, that America’s liberal character makes “American empire a structural impossibility,” yet he accepts that the current liberal world order is “built around the American provision of security and economic public goods,” that “America’s massive power advantages do give the order a hierarchical cast,” and that “American power did not destabilize world order—it helped create it.” Similarly, David Lake argues in this symposium (2008:6) that it is possible to “oppose the imperialist policy pursued by the Bush administration,” but still “support the hierarchies created by the United States over the last century and believe they have contributed to peace and prosperity in today’s world.”

Yet if the American power project is generally seen as legitimate, what exactly is it about the neo-con imperial project that IR scholars so dislike? Beyond the obvious issue of whether invading Iraq was in America’s long-term strategic interests, one gleans from the criticisms an overarching concern with the gleefully arrogant manner in which the neo-con’s set about their imperialism. The neo-cons reveled in American power in a practical sense, so that we invaded other countries regardless of whether we were attacked first. And they reveled in

American power in a very public sense, so that numerous raspberries were blown in anyone's face who might have cared that the United States was on the move. In so doing, the neo-cons transformed the United States "from appearing to be benign into looking like an arrogant braggart" (Cox 2004:605). Almost every analyst of America's behavior during this time period critically comments on this aspect of neo-con foreign policy, and in so doing reflects a concern with *how* America presents its power to the world and what people think of American power in turn. Even supporters of the neo-con project have suggested that they could "show more understanding for the sensibilities of others, a little generosity of spirit" (Kagan 2002:14).

That public taunting should bother most IR observers is intriguing. After all, if you've got it, why not flaunt it? Yet like a sexually active teenager girl who is advised by her mother to behave demurely to avoid the public appellation "slut," IR analysts argue that flaunting one's power in world politics is both counterproductive and highly unseemly. It is counterproductive because it might lead to negative consequences such as a counterbalancing alliance, imperial "blowback," or the unraveling of our stable and prosperous world order, although most analysts also seem to dismiss these as immediate possibilities almost out of hand given America's immense relative power.⁸ It is also counterproductive because it will make it more difficult to get other nation-states to help you later or in other issue areas.

Thus, many critics of neo-con imperialism argue that the United States should exercise "soft power" instead, whereby others are attracted to you for your values and your willingness to listen and nurture multilateralism (Nye 2004b). In other words, you do not have to advertise your considerable attributes, because boys will be attracted to you simply for your sparkling personality. It is not clear, however, that soft power is all that different from hard power in practice, as Janice Bially Mattern (2007) has argued (see also Ferguson 2003:66–68), or that neo-cons are not already wedded to the notion that others will be attracted to United States foreign policies simply because they are American in origin. This is, after all, what Krauthammer (2002–2003:16) means to suggest when arguing, "coalitions are not made by superpowers going begging hat in hand. They are made by asserting a position and inviting others to join."

Ultimately public power taunting appears to upset IR analysts because it does not observe the traditional niceties of power politics. As Michael Cox (2004:605) puts this: "what the new right manifestly failed to understand was one of the most basic laws of international relations: namely, that unless carefully masked in various ways, the vast accumulation of power in one pair of hands is likely to generate deep resentment." In other words, a great power like the United States should walk softly even as it carries some very big sticks. Even realists, who usually have no qualms talking tough about power, urge public constraint lest the American "unipolar" moment prematurely come to an end due to an angry counterbalancing backlash.⁹

There seems to be analytical agreement among American scholars, then, that while the United States should always be ready to hit its neighbor's head when doing so will obtain American interests, it should not be happy about having to do so (any more than, according to America's moral majority, a teenage girl should simply like having sex or publicly flaunting her body). The United States

⁸"Blowback" is a term coined by Chalmers Johnson (2002) to indicate a range of negative responses to imperialism. Alternatively, see Brooks and Wohlforth (2002); Ikenberry (2004); and Stewart (2001:7). Of course, such negative consequences could occur even in the absence of public taunting.

⁹There has been considerable debate in the security studies field on this issue; see, for example, Ikenberry (2002); Layne (2003, 2006, 2007); Layne and Thayer (2006); Walt (2006); and Wohlforth (1999).

should instead behave publicly demure, remain less overt about its power and capabilities, and appear to take seriously the concerns and interests of others, even as it is planning to act unilaterally and project its power to obtain its interests. The assertion that the exercise of power should be humble seems to derive from a desire to make American power more palatable, but palatable for whom?

Most analysts suggest that humility maintains the favorable impressions of others. Patrick Stewart (2001:7) argues, for example, that “perceived unilateralism may undermine American claims of benevolent hegemony, if foreign observers see the United States as pursuing policies without regard for their opinions, bypassing appropriate multilateral regimes, or holding itself above international norms.” G. John Ikenberry (2004:623) claims that neo-con ideas “are unsettling today’s order and the political bargains behind it” which depend on the belief that “the United States makes its power safe for the world and in return the world agrees to live within the American system.” David Lake in this symposium (2008:7) argues that “enthusiasm for domination of others undermines hierarchy” and, that in their “imperial hubris,” the Bush administration has undermined “the authority that had been carefully nurtured by past administrations” which amounts to “ambition revealed.” And Stephen Brooks and William Wohlforth (2002:33) assert that “magnanimity and restraint in the face of temptation are tenets of successful statecraft,” and that “ignoring others’ concerns avoids hassles today at the cost of more serious trouble tomorrow.” The list of claims along these lines is almost endless.

Underlying such concerns seems to be an assumption that, by behaving discreetly and acting concerned, those with less power are more docile and accepting of America’s greater relative power. Of course including other leaders in the decision-making process can also spread the goodies, so that leaders are more willing to condone or sell American dominance to their own populations.¹⁰ But the assumption that a humble use of power makes its exercise more acceptable and attractive to others seems strange. Just who exactly is supposed to be fooled by U.S. magnanimity? Has the rest of the world really not noticed that the United States is ambitious and will use its power unilaterally to get what it wants, in spite of everyone else’s preferences? And while we assume that our model of political freedom and capitalist production “spreads because it is naturally desirable and others freely choose it,” does it really not occur to us that, as Linda Bishai (2004:51) points out, even “in its most benign aspect, nations must sign on simply to survive” and this naturally engenders enormous antipathy? Are we so blinded by our own imagined beneficence that we do not see how, as Anna Agathangelou and Lily Ling (2005:37) point out, “such effacements and exclusions consolidate neoliberal state power structures, constantly reproduced through new transnational forms,” but “for the heirs of colonial pain and burden...rage ferments”?

That the neo-con imperial project unsettles most political analysts not for its power projection but for its hubris seems outrageous, almost fantastical. It also seems illogical, as it is premised on highly dubious assumptions about how others see and react to U.S. behavior. And that leads me to wonder if the niceties of power politics are not primarily observed as a way to make our power projection more palatable *to us*. That is, flaunting our power subverts the sort of public face of power that Americans are most comfortable projecting. Neo-cons deviate from the American norm not because they claim, as Charles Krauthammer (2002–2003:17) has, that “the future of the unipolar era hinges on whether

¹⁰See, for example, Ikenberry and Kupchan’s (1990) arguments for how powerful states normatively socialize other states into accepting them as hegemons, or O’Reilly and Renfro’s (2007) discussion of the sort of domestic gains that can be made by imperial allies and proxies.

America is governed by those who wish to retain, augment, and use unipolarity to advance not just American but global ends.” Such a statement is actually consistent with American’s historical vision of itself, and, as Colin Dueck (2006:23) has observed, “there is fairly wide agreement, in the abstract, within the United States over the principle of promoting a more liberal world order.” Thus, most American political pundits and scholars who are disturbed by the term “empire” to describe U.S. power projection have no problem considering the projection to be a relatively legitimate enterprise. Where neo-cons deviate is in arguing “explicitly and unashamedly for maintaining unipolarity,” and for recognizing that the challenge to this comes “not from the outside but from the inside” (Krauthammer 2002–2003: 17) As Krauthammer puts it bluntly, “History has given you an empire, if you will keep it.”

Sheriff on the Prowl at High Noon

Whether Americans want to keep their “empire” rather depends on whether they even have a clue that they’ve got one, and Niall Ferguson (2003, 2004) among others has argued they do not.¹¹ Certainly Americans remain woefully unaware of the world and their own government’s behavior in it, and most of them do not even own passports. They do think, however, that they are a benevolent, peaceful, fun; loving people who should be well-liked and respected by foreigners for all the collective good they do. The term “empire” provokes debate because it triggers discursive, normative, and psychological tensions over how Americans think about themselves and their behavior in the world. The favored label among political pundits is instead the “sheriff” who, according to the conservative analyst Robert Kagan (2002:7) acts “as Gary Cooper in high noon,” and “will defend the townspeople, whether the townspeople want them to or not” (see also Haass 1997; Stewart 2001:9). This image stokes the American ego while tapping into its cultural and historical ideals about an anarchic and limitless frontier, the efficacy of violence for restoring order, and the ability to exclusively determine and mete out justice. Americans either do not know or are not terribly disturbed that the rest of the world does not find this image comforting (and nor would Americans if they were on the other end of the Winchester).

The terms we IR scholars have used to describe U.S. behavior have also been part of the niceties that have made our power projection palatable. Because, in Gramscian terms, we “supply intellectual and moral support for the hegemon’s dominant political role” (Augelli and Murphy 1993:131), it is no surprise that we prefer to use the terms “unipolarity,” “great power,” “superpower,” or “hegemon” instead. Such terms shield us from accepting that the United States continually behaves in a very nasty, imperialistic manner toward the rest of the world. The term “hegemony,” for example, is used to suggest “leadership” or “authority.” In the hegemonic stability literature, our hegemony is deemed to be necessary not because we are bad imperialists but because leadership or authority is required for all economic exchange to occur efficiently. We are not imposing an empire, we are producing a world order, so the story goes. This has a benign ring to it that appeals to Americans, since it suggests that we are serving our interests and that of the collective good at the same time, and it is always possible to add the adjective “benevolent” to hegemon just in case the point is not obvious.¹² The same can be said for terms such as “great power” or

¹¹See also Bacevich (2003); Bishai (2004); Cox (2004); and Ignatieff (2003b).

¹²Similarly, Grunberg (1990) argues that hegemonic stability theory continues to be popular not because of its empirical validity (which is questionable at best) but because it appeals to primitive/religious myth imagery.

“superpower.” The very term “great” suggests something wonderful and grand; the term “super” implies something marvelous and fantastic. In fact Americans love “power” which is why they give it such qualifiers.¹³ And if they mistakenly think the use of military power will automatically “shock and awe” others, it is because power shocks and awes them.

But power projection for the national interest has always been married to some moral mission in America that is intended to reap benefits for the rest of the world as well. The “sense of ‘exceptionalism’ that pervades American political culture,” Patrick Stewart (2001:3) notes, means that “most Americans, regardless of political affiliation, share a faith in the uniqueness of the country’s founding principles and institutions and a conviction that the United States has a special destiny among nations.”¹⁴ This is not supposed to be power for its own sake. Instead Americans imagine that our greatness is divine providence and hence our mission is to save everyone else—not at our own expense and self-denial of course—but *as* we are achieving our own aims. And so, “like all great powers before it,” as Michael Cox (2004:587) observes, the United States sees “itself as the embodiment of a new and higher kind of civilization,” which has “a well-defined ideological mission of holding back the ‘barbarians.’” Why else would we have this power if it were not to smite our enemies (who are, by definition, enemies of humanity itself)?

It is no surprise, then, that American culture specializes in producing fictitious, Hollywood action heroes who wield enormous power for the greater good. Tom Cruise saves us from a deadly plague, Bruce Willis blows up asteroids to protect the entire planet, Jack Bauer rescues yet another American city from terrorist attack, the *Quiet American* tries to save the personification of Vietnam, an American president jumps into a cockpit so he can shot down invading aliens, and Superman is always flying to the rescue.¹⁵ Americans certainly love their sheriffs, which is why they afford them such wide latitude to run amok in the world. If neo-cons seem to represent a different kind of sheriff it is only because they flaunted the attributes of power, domination, and violence that Gary Cooper’s more subtle performance only hinted at.

Imperialism, on the other hand, has hugely negative connotations for Americans. It suggests exploitation for its own sake, power with no moral purpose or the wrong purpose, power exercised to benefit only oneself, power to take from others and impose what they do not want. We imagine that’s what old colonial powers in Europe did, and we are supposed to be different. We are supposed to have escaped the deadening hand of history, to be “better” because we won’t repeat the same historical mistakes or patterns. Sheriffs are not imperialists. At high noon they walk out onto a deserted street and, despite great personal sacrifice, stand up for what is right, just, and true. Imperialists are, on the other hand, well, just imperial and no American, with the exception of those crazy neo-cons, wants to think of himself as just another power-grubbing emperor imposing selfish demands that damage global life on a daily scale. “Thus, the national story goes on, all proving, to American satisfaction at least, that the United States was, and remains, different: the one great exception to the expansionary logic that has governed the behavior of all other great powers in the past” (Cox 2004:588).

¹³For an extended treatment of America’s relationship response to the concept of power, see Lifton (2003a,b), who argues that a significant element of American public consciousness is defined by what he calls a “superpower syndrome,” in that it believes in its own omnipotence.

¹⁴Extended discussions of this topic may be found in Dueck (2006); Hartz (1955); Hoff (2008); Hunt (1987); Lieven (2005); Lipset (1997); and McDougall (1997).

¹⁵Secunda and Moran (2007:3–4) discuss other examples of what they call “the American mythic character” of “the frontiersman who brings law and order to the chaos of the wilderness.”

Perhaps this is the normative trick that all great powers, all empires, play on themselves, or perhaps it is uniquely American to imagine a moral purpose to one's power projection.¹⁶ There is, as Hans Morgenthau (1952:971) once observed, "something unhealthy in a craving for ideological intoxication and in the inability to act and to see merit in action except under the stimulant of grandiose ideas and far-fetched schemes." But it is certainly constitutive of America's exercise of power. In other words, it is impossible to understand *how* America goes about projecting its power and ruling its dominions unless one recognizes that lying at the heart of the American imperial project is a tension between its fetish for power and its vision of itself as God's unique, moral crusader. Does it *matter* if we call all of this an empire? From one analytical position it makes no difference whether we use the term "empire" to describe what America power projection is all about. From another analytical position, it might make all the difference in and to the world.

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¹⁶On the other hand, Reus-Smit's (1999) study suggests that historically most powerful societies organize their interrelations according to internally derived moral purposes whose content varies according to internal attributes.

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