

## **THE EMPIRE'S BACK IN TOWN: OR AMERICA'S IMPERIAL TEMPTATION - AGAIN**

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## *Rome on the Potomac*

### *“Empire -Sure! Why Not?”<sup>1</sup>*

In times of tranquility, as Trotsky once observed, human beings tended to believe - made their own form of prediction if you like - that the future was always more likely to look like the past than anything else; in times of great change however they took comfort in a different way - by assuming, or at least hoping, that after a period of great turbulence, life would quickly return to that condition known as ‘normal’.<sup>2</sup> Keynes made a similar kind of observation in a little known aside on the ‘Great War’ of 1914. As he noted, after having lived through an extended period of relative peace, hardly anybody expected the conflict to break out in the first place, fewer still were psychologically prepared for the devastating impact it subsequently had on apparently indestructible international structures, and some then tried to cope with the scale of the change wrought by four years of bloody conflict by denying there had been very much change at all.<sup>3</sup> As Carr later reflected - sixty years after the event itself - once the dust had settled, it was generally thought that patterns established over the previous century would soon be re-established once the peacemakers had done their job in Paris. Subsequent events proved how wrong this particular prognosis turned out to be. But as he pointed out, there was a distinct feeling at the time that with a little goodwill and lots of new diplomacy, regular service would be restored as soon as possible.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Christopher Hitchens, ‘Imperialism, Superpower dominance, malignant and benign’, December 10, 2002. <http://slate.msn.com/id=2075261>

<sup>2</sup> I discuss this in my ‘Will the real Leon Trotsky please stand up?’ in Hillel Ticktin and Michael Cox eds., *The Ideas of Leon Trotsky* (London: Porcupine, 1995).

<sup>3</sup> See John Maynard Keynes, *The Economic Consequences of the Peace* (London: 1919)

I make these preliminary observations not for their own sake but because they help set in context the way in which some commentators at first tried to come to terms with what happened on September 11, by any measure one of the more significant events in recent history - namely, by insisting that appalling and personally tragic though the attack might have been, its importance should not be exaggerated.<sup>5</sup> This was not a view shared by everybody. In fact, given the shocking quality of the images produced on the day, there was strong inclination amongst some to take almost the opposite point of view. Nevertheless, according to some rather influential analysts we had to be careful not to overstate the historical import of what happened on that Tuesday morning. Significantly, Francis Fukuyama put the case for intellectual sobriety more forcefully than most. September 11, he admitted, was carnage on a grand scale. But this did not necessarily make it a 'defining moment'. In his view, indeed, it was little more than a 'blip' whose impact might be significant in the short term but whose effect on the shape of international relations over the longer term was likely to be much less significant than many seemed to be claiming.<sup>6</sup> A number of historians arrived at much the same conclusion not long after the attack itself. Yes, they argued, 9:11 was a traumatic moment; however, when compared to the truly transformative events of the past, such as the event in Sarajevo which led to the First World War, Pearl Harbour and the fall of the Berlin Wall, it was but small beer. Beware therefore those bearing false historical analogies. Beware too those who would use 9:11 for their own particular purposes; indeed, amongst a few commentators there was an additional reason perhaps for maintaining one's cool: the fear that if we joined in the general hue and cry we could easily end up privileging American suffering over that

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<sup>4</sup> Carr's observations on the world of 1919 can be found in his autobiographical note in Michael Cox ed., *E.H. Carr: A Critical Appraisal* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2000).

<sup>5</sup> Richard Crockatt, *America Embattled: September 11, Anti-Americanism and the Global Order* (London: Routledge, 2003) p. 7.

<sup>6</sup> The Fukuyama comment about 9:11 is made in David Usborne, 'The future ain't what it used to be', *The Independent Review*, 7 April 2003, p. 4.

of others. This it was suggested was not only morally indefensible; it might play into American hands by making them feel even more self-important than they tended to anyway. In short: maintain balance less we feed the hegemon's vanity.

Caution in the cause of scholarship is no bad thing of course. Indeed, in the immediate aftermath of the attack it was especially important to keep one's head - metaphorically speaking - when everybody else seemed to be losing theirs. But nearly two years after the event, such *sang froid* might be regarded as less a sign of academic balance than sheer intellectual blindness. For as we gaze back upon the debris left behind in the wake of 9:11, it is difficult not to be struck by the enormous impact which the atrocity has already had upon world politics. This is unquestionably the view of those who have been 'present at creation' within the Bush administration itself; and it is fast becoming the view of some of its critics. As John Ikenberry has soberly reminded us, the extent of the change since 9:11 has been profound and dramatic - possibly even more profound and more dramatic than the changes brought about by the end of the Cold War between 1989 and 1991.<sup>7</sup> It is hard to disagree. Just consider the record. In a short space of time the United States has for the first time since the end of the Cold War constructed a well-defined foreign policy, waged two successful wars in faraway places, increased its military spending by several percentile points, established important military relations with a number of key countries in the former USSR, put all of its enemies on probation, gone well beyond the limits set by the laws of war in its treatment of terrorist suspects, introduced important bureaucratic and political changes at home, and probably overcome that which many people once thought to be a permanent American affliction: the so-called Vietnam Syndrome. In the process it has

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<sup>7</sup> G. John Ikenberry, 'America's Imperial Ambition', *Foreign Affairs*, Volume 81, No. 5, September-October 2002, pp. 44 - 60.

also advanced a new strategic doctrine that justifies the preemptive use of military power against potential as opposed to real threats, fallen out very badly with a number of its key European allies, and taken what might turn out to be the crucial decision of withdrawing its forces and bases from Saudi Arabia; and all this in a context where the whole architecture of the post-war order seemed to be under threat. In fact, the only thing that does not appear to have changed since 9:11 is the special relationship the United States continues to have with the UK - and even this it has been argued, might not last for long in a world where the United States appears to have more need for coalitions of the willing rather than permanent allies who need constant attention and wooing.<sup>8</sup> As one of the more perceptive analysts of world politics forecast not long after the attack, those two hours in Manhattan might turn out to be amongst some of the most important in more recent history - and how right he turned out to be.<sup>9</sup>

In this context, where so little seems to be certain and so much is in flux, it is hardly surprising that analysts have been hard pressed to keep up with international affairs in general and the extraordinarily activist foreign policy of the United States in particular. Certainly, it is difficult to remember a time when we have all been so fascinated and preoccupied with America, and for good reason: the primary source of all these new disturbances, ironically, has not been those who originally attacked the Twin Towers and the Pentagon, but the US itself. Thus what it now does or does not do, what its leaders say, what its thinkers think, and what its military undertakes, has become the subject of the most intense speculation - particularly outside of the United States. Even in France, that sophisticated bastion of traditional anti-Americanism, books galore now cram the book-shops

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<sup>8</sup> Rodric Braithwaite, 'End of the Affair', *Prospect*, Issue 86, May 2003, pp. 20 - 23.

<sup>9</sup> Fred Halliday, *Two Hours That Shook The World . September 11, 2001: Causes and Consequences* (London: Saqi Books, 2002).

seeking to explain to a largely French audience why they now find themselves passing through such disturbing times. And the answer provided by most of these worthy tomes is nearly always the same: the United States, they repeat, has abandoned all international niceties and set out on a new course to establish a new kind of global dominion.<sup>10</sup> The strategy might not work. The new hegemon may even now be in trouble.<sup>11</sup> No matter. 'America', to cite the title of one fairly typical study, 'is back', and the rest of the world, and not just France, had better watch out.<sup>12</sup>

All roads therefore seem to lead back to the issue of power in the abstract and American power in reality, and a rare consensus seems to be emerging that while there may be many different ways of defining and measuring this particular commodity we call power, there can be no doubting that the US now possesses vast quantities of it - especially in its hard military form. Naturally, this piece of news has been received differently in different places, being a cause for some celebration amongst most Americans, a source of concern for a lot of Europeans, and a reason for wonder amongst those who had previously assumed the US had either gone soft or was on its way down. A number of experts have certainly had to eat a lot of humble pie of late, none more so perhaps than the influential historian Paul Kennedy, for several years the English prophet of American doom. Kennedy, recall, made his reputation in the late 1980s by predicting the longer term 'relative' decline of America as a great power.<sup>13</sup> He now sings from a very different hymn-sheet. With the American military in bullish mood and the hawks in the driving seat, there was little, he felt, that the United States could not do

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<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Noel Mamere and Patrick Farbiaz, *Dangereuse Amerique: Chronique d'une guerre annonce* (Paris: Editions Ramsay, 2003); Eric Laurent, *La Guerre Des Bush* (Paris: Plon, 2003); and Jean Gusnel, *Bush Contre Saddam* (Paris: Editions La Decouverte, 2003).

<sup>11</sup> Emmanuel Todd, *Après L'Empire: Essai sur la decomposition du system americaine* (Paris: Gallimard, 2002).

<sup>12</sup> Gerard Chaliand and Arnaud Blin, *America Is Back: Les Nouveaux Césars Du Pentagone* (Paris: Bayard, 2003).

<sup>13</sup> See Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of Great Powers* (New York: Random House, 1988).

if it so chose. Consequently, those amongst the pundits who had once talked of its future as being a bleak one - though nowhere did he seem to include himself on the wanted list - had been compelled to recant. America he concluded was on a roll; there was really only player left on the field; and woebetide anybody, or any power, who got in the way. The eagle had landed - at last, and possibly for good.<sup>14</sup>

Inevitably, all this anguished debate has led many observers to ask the obvious question: how exactly should we characterize America's post 9:11 position within the larger society of states? 'Unipolarity' it is agreed is useful enough, and amongst most IR specialists probably has most of the votes. However, as even its most devoted of advocates would concede, it does little more than define a wider structure and actually says little about the United States as such, other than making the rather obvious point that it is now the only truly significant actor left in the international system.<sup>15</sup> 'Superpower' passes muster. But as one of the sharpest observers of the American scene has pointed out, we only continue to use it because it does little more than recognize the obvious.<sup>16</sup> And while 'Hegemon' has some takers, nobody seems to agree on what it means precisely, and anyway in the twenty first century this old Greek classic now sounds faintly passe.<sup>17</sup> Which appears to leave only one possibility, that old favourite from more radical times known as 'Empire'. Long thought buried, and for most academics consigned into that proverbial dustbin of history with its twin brother (or sister) called 'imperialism', the idea of Empire has indeed made

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<sup>14</sup> I discuss Paul Kennedy's late conversion to the cause of US hegemony in my 'American Power Before and After the Towers', in Ken Booth and Tim Dunne eds., *Worlds in Collision*. (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002) pp. 152 - 161.

<sup>15</sup> See David Wilkinson, 'Unipolarity without Hegemony', *International Studies Review*, Vol.1, No.1, 1999, pp. 144-172.

<sup>16</sup> Christopher Hitchens, 'Imperialism. Superpower dominance, malignant and benign', 10 December, 2002, p. 1. <http://slate.msn.com/?id=2075261>.

<sup>17</sup> I discuss the relevance of hegemony in my 'September 11<sup>th</sup> and U.S. hegemony -or Will the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Be American Too?', *International Studies Perspective*, 2002, 3, pp. 53 - 70.

a most dramatic intellectual comeback of late. Charles Maier has observed, 'a decade ago, certainly two', the very idea would have caused 'righteous indignation' amongst most American observers. But not any longer.<sup>18</sup> As Ronald Wright has noted, 'how recently we believed the age of empire was dead', but how popular the idea has now become in certain American circles.<sup>19</sup> However, something interesting and strange appears to have happened along the way. For whereas in the 1960s the term was the monopoly of the left,<sup>20</sup> it has recently become all the rage on the neo-conservative right; and what many of them appeared to be suggesting was quite startling: namely, that we should start calling things by their right name, drop the pretence that America is not an Empire, and accept that if the world was going to be a stable place, the US had to act in much the same imperial fashion as the British and Romans had done several centuries before. This was all very heady stuff. Indeed - they went on - it was precisely because the United States had been insufficiently assertive in the 1990s that 9:11 happened in the first place.<sup>21</sup> Such inertia was no longer an option. In a fragmenting post-modern world, where small bands of fanatics could cause havoc and mayhem, there was only one possible solution. Politicians might want to call it something else, and no doubt President Bush would deny that 'America' had 'an Empire to extend'.<sup>22</sup> But that is precisely what the United States would have to do. Other existing methods had been tried and found wanting. Now, in a new era, where old forms of deterrence and traditional assumptions about threats no longer held, it was up to America to impose its own form of order on a disorderly world: to fight the savage

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<sup>18</sup> Charles S. Maier, 'An American Empire', *Harvard Magazine*, November-December 2002, Volume 105, No. 2, pp. 28 - 31.

<sup>19</sup> Ronald Wright, 'For a wild surmise', *Times Literary Supplement*, December 20, 2002, p. 3.

<sup>20</sup> See Alex Callinicos, 'The grand strategy of the American empire', *International Socialism*, 97, Winter 2002, pp. 3 - 38.

<sup>21</sup> Ivan Eland, 'The Empire Strikes Out; The "New Imperialism" and Its Fatal Flaws', *Policy Analysis*, No. 459, November 26, 2002, pp. 1 - 27.

<sup>22</sup> George Bush speeches to cadets at West Point (June 2002) and to veterans at the White House (November 2002).



war of peace (to quote one of the new gurus) so as to protect and enlarge the empire of liberty.<sup>23</sup>

Of course, the new imperialists as they soon became known, were careful to make some important distinctions. The American Empire they conceded was very different to anything that had gone before. For one thing, it was far more benevolent; for another, it did not seek to take over countries but rather shape their choices in a progressive direction. There was, in fact, a quite ‘virtual’ quality about this particular Empire with its enormous power that it rarely used.<sup>24</sup> As one commentator readily conceded, there was something distinctly ‘funny’ about the American Empire.<sup>25</sup> But this was no reason not to exploit the idea at all. After all, it had a long historical pedigree, and while some Americans in an earlier, more settled, age may have been unwilling to draw parallels between the United States and other great systems of imperial rule, in these new, more disturbed times, such intellectual timidity was no longer defensible. History indeed had much to teach the US in its time of need. As one of the new theorists of Empire put it, American policy-makers could do a lot worse than turn to the chroniclers of the Greek, Roman and British empires ‘for helpful hints about how to run American foreign policy’.<sup>26</sup> And what such wise men taught was simple and blunt: that the only way for a great power to remain great was by acting assertively and ruthlessly. Such a policy had worked for others in the past and there was no reason it should not work for America now. ‘The logic of neo-imperialism’ was, in the last analysis, simply ‘too compelling to resist’.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Max Boot, *The Savage Wars of Peace: Small Wars and the Rise of American Power* (New York: Basic Books, 2002).

<sup>24</sup> Martin Walker, ‘America’s Virtual Empire’, *World Policy Journal*, Summer 2002, pp. 13 - 20.

<sup>25</sup> Victor Davis Hanson, ‘A Funny Sort of Empire’, *National Review Online*, November 27, 2002.

<sup>26</sup> Robert Kaplan, *Warrior Politics: Why Leadership Demands a Pagan Ethos* (New York: Random House, 2002) pp. 152, 153.

<sup>27</sup> Sebastian Mallaby, ‘The Reluctant Imperialist: Terrorism, Failed States, and the Case for American Empire’, *Foreign Affairs*, No. 81, no. 2, March-April 2002, p. 6.

Naturally, such revisionist ideas did not command complete support across the political board. In fact, most American academics remained decidedly cool about the idea that one could achieve security through expansion,<sup>28</sup> while many more warned that this ‘dangerous quest’ could easily end in hubristic tears.<sup>29</sup> Yet in the post-9:11 world this bold new thesis - repeated with a relentlessness that was almost breathtaking in its audacity - was clearly beginning to hit the intended target: namely, American policy-makers. Indeed, it was quite evident, that many of the modern imperialists were not only well published but had important friends in some very high places. One of the new theorists, for example was, or at least had been, an influential writer on *The Wall Street Journal* (a favourite read of the ‘Bushies’).<sup>30</sup> Another was a popular pundit with a well-established reputation for capturing the American mood.<sup>31</sup> A third had already made his name in the earlier neo-conservative intervention on multiculturalism.<sup>32</sup> And a fourth was a regular columnist for the *Washington Post*, who like many of his peers probably felt he was only expressing in public what many in the White House had been talking about in private.<sup>33</sup> Some of the talk was not even that confidential, as the famous 2002 National Security Strategy document revealed only too graphically. Admittedly, there was much within it that was not controversial. However, there was a great deal which was - especially those sections where it talked bluntly and unambiguously of pre-emption in a world in which US hegemony was not simply assumed but

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<sup>28</sup> Jack Snyder, *Myths of Empire: Domestic Politics and International Relations* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991).

<sup>29</sup> David C. Hendrickson, ‘Toward Universal Empire: The Dangerous Quest for Absolute Security’ *World Policy Journal*, Volume XIX, No. 3, Fall 2002, pp. 1 -10.

<sup>30</sup> Max Boot, ‘The Case for American Empire’, *Weekly Standard*, October 15, 2001.

<sup>31</sup> Robert Kaplan. See also Preston Jones, ‘The World According to Robert Kaplan’, *Ottawa Citizen*, March 3, 2002.

<sup>32</sup> Dinesh D’Souza, ‘In praise of American empire’, *Christian Science Monitor*, April 26, 2002.

<sup>33</sup> Sebastian Mallaby. For a pre-9:11 argument in favour of an American Empire see also Thomas E. Ricks, ‘Empire or Not? A Quiet Debate over the U.S. role’, *Washington Post*, August 21, 2001.

would be actively pursued by all means necessary.<sup>34</sup> As one observer put it, in the shadow of 9:11 many new ideas were circulating within the foreign policy community, but the most radical it seemed was that in an age of ‘unparalleled global dominance’ the United States had every right to arrogate to itself the international role of setting standards, determining threats, using force and meting out justice.<sup>35</sup> Call it unilateralism; call it the necessary response to new threats: it was imperialism by any other name. The idea that had ‘dared not speak its name’ for at least a generation had been thrust back on to the agenda.<sup>36</sup>

In what follows I want to reflect on the theory and practice of the ‘new American Empire’ by dealing in an abbreviated, and I hope provocative fashion, with three very specific issues: the sources of the new debate about Empire, the more general applicability of the term, and the possible future for the American Empire as a real world phenomenon. I make a number of claims. The first is that Empire is not really new at all in US grand narratives; in fact one can trace the debate back to the very foundations of the American republic. Furthermore, while the more modern version of the discussion only really began in earnest after 9:11, one can detect powerful rumblings on the conservative right long before the attack itself. To this extent September 11 is probably better understood as a catalytic converter for a debate that was already under way, rather than the direct cause of the debate itself. This in turn leads to a second issue: about the appropriateness of the term itself. It is evident that the idea of Empire as applied to the United States can be questioned on several grounds.<sup>37</sup> But as the new conservatives have pointed out, the concept (ambiguous warts and all) does

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<sup>34</sup> John Lewis Gaddis, ‘A Grand Strategy of Transformation’, *Foreign Policy*, November- December 2002, pp. 1 -8.

<sup>35</sup> G. John Ikenberry, ‘America’s Imperial Ambition’, p. 44.

<sup>36</sup> See Niall Ferguson, ‘The empire that dare not speak its name’, *The Sunday Times*, April 13, 2003.

<sup>37</sup> See for example Martin Shaw, ‘Post-Imperial and Quasi-Imperial: State and Empire in the Global Era’, *Millennium*, 2002, Vol. 31, No.2, pp. 327-336.

have its uses as a comparative tool of analysis, one which has not been fully exploited in the past, partly for methodological reasons - the term after all is open to different meanings - but largely because it has for so long been associated with a radical critique of American foreign policy.<sup>38</sup> This has been particularly unfortunate and has made it virtually impossible for other commentators to employ the concept at all.<sup>39</sup> My argument here is that it is now time to rescue the idea and put it back where it belongs, at the centre of the discussion of what in fact has become the most extensive international system in history. Finally, I want to explore the future of the American Empire. Here I argue that this may be less problematic than has been implied by a number of writers who have been looking forward to its demise for some time, but more serious than has been suggested by the various triumphalists who over the past few years have been predicting an extraordinarily bright future for the United States. It may well be the case that the twenty first century will turn out to be just as American as the twentieth.<sup>40</sup> But this does not mean it will be roses all the way. The American Empire retains many obvious assets: moreover, it continues to play a central role at the heart of the world order.<sup>41</sup> However, it confronts some very serious challenges - some increasingly of its own making - and it might find these very difficult to resolve in the turbulent years that undoubtedly lie ahead.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> 'Those who by virtue of age and sobriety can remember the 1960s may recall the term "American empire" as a bit of left-wing cant', Ronald Wright, *Times Literary Supplement*, p.3.

<sup>39</sup> Though see the useful piece by Tarak Barkawi and Mark Laffey, 'Retrieving the Imperial: *Empire* and International Relations', *Millennium*, 2002, Vol. 31, no. 1, pp. 109-127.

<sup>40</sup> For an example of the new triumphalism see Alfredo Valladao, *The Twenty First Century Will Be American* (London: Verso, 1996).

<sup>41</sup> See Thanh Duong, *Hegemonic Globalisation: U.S. centrality and global strategy in the emerging world order* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003).

<sup>42</sup> On this see the useful David Campbell, 'Contradictions of lonely superpower', in David Slater and Peter J. Taylor eds., *The American Century: Consensus and Coercion in the Projection of American Power* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999) pp. 222-242.

## ***Promised Land - Crusader State***<sup>43</sup>

*“One of the central themes of American historiography is that there is no American Empire”*<sup>44</sup>

*“It is an empire without a consciousness of itself as such, constantly shocked that its good intentions arouse resentment abroad. But that does not make it any the less of an empire, with a conviction that it alone, in Herman Melville’s words, bears ‘the ark of liberties of the world’”*<sup>45</sup>

The concept of Empire in the United States was of course first employed by the Founding Fathers to describe a political mission linked to a geographical aspiration in which liberty and continental expansion were intimately connected. One in effect could not exist without the other. Thus the conquest of America required a people yearning to be free, while freedom, as Frederick Jackson Turner later noted in one of the more important essays ever written on American history, demanded an ever-expanding frontier.<sup>46</sup> This influential, and very American notion combined in turn with another equally powerful set of ideas about American exceptionalism, a condition which described the obvious fact (at least obvious to most Americans) that the United States was both distinctive and superior to all other nations. This not only rendered it immune to criticism from abroad - always useful for a nation with global ambitions; it also meant it had the God-given duty to spread the dream and promise of America beyond its own shores. Indeed, as many Americans readily admitted, if the American way was good enough for the United States then

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<sup>43</sup> See Walter A. McDougall, *Promised Land: Crusader State; The American Encounter with the World* (Boston; Mass, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1997).

<sup>44</sup> William Appleman Williams, ‘The Frontier Thesis and American Foreign Policy’, Vol. XXIV, *Pacific Historic Review*, p. 379.

<sup>45</sup> Michael Ignatieff, ‘Empire Lite’, *Prospect*, 83, February 2003, p. 36.

<sup>46</sup> Frederick Jackson Turner, ‘The Significance of the Frontier in American History’ published in 1893.

it was certainly good enough for the rest of the world.<sup>47</sup> But in no way should this be confused with imperialism of the more traditional kind. After all, even though the US might have used force outside of its borders on no less than 101 occasions between 1801 and 1904, its mission - at least in its own mind - was not to conquer other peoples but to liberate them from despotism, in much the same way as it had liberated itself from British rule in the late eighteenth century. In this fashion, the US managed to carve out a special position for itself in the long history of aspiring world powers. Not for it the ideological embarrassment of trying to defend the institution of colonialism, or the costs involved in occupying other countries, but the more noble purpose of bringing a better way of life to others less fortunate than itself. Naturally, such an outlook inevitably infused US foreign policy with a particularly moralistic and idealistic tone, much to the great chagrin of later realist critics like Morgenthau and Kennan. But it also permitted it the rare privilege of pursuing policies designed to advance its own interests while all the time believing, or at least claiming, that it was doing so for the benefit of mankind. J.R. Seeley once wrote that the British acquired an Empire in a fit of absent-mindedness. When the United States acquired one of its own it would be in a state of 'deep denial'.<sup>48</sup>

The rise of the United States as a world power by 1898, and its more complete emergence as a superpower in two stages at the end of the First and then the Second World War, is one of the great American stories with its assortment of European dead beats, perfidious but heroic Brits, internationalist paragons, and isolationist villains, all playing their various walk-on parts in a play of epic proportions that in the end left only one

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<sup>47</sup> See Pierre Hassner, *The United States: the empire of force or the force of empire?* Chaillot Papers, Paris, No. 54, September 2002, p.14.

<sup>48</sup> Michael Ignatieff, 'Empire Lite', *Prospect*, Issue 83, February 2003, pp. 36 - 43, and Niall Ferguson, 'The empire that dares not speak its name', *The Sunday Times*, (New Review) April 13, 2003, p. 3

serious actor standing on the stage of history. Yet to read many of the less reflective tales told about this spectacular but deeply uneven process, one could easily come away thinking the United States never really wanted to become a major international player in the first place. It was, to use that most useful of phrases, a most 'reluctant superpower', one that feared 'entangling alliances' which was only enticed out of its natural state of self-imposed isolationism by the threat posed by others. It is all very comforting. But brute facts still remain brute facts - as Chris Brown has rather nicely put it - and the fact of the matter is that by 1945 this most innocent of countries, with apparently little liking for the idea of power, and even less for running the world, happened to be in charge of most of the world's economic resources, the majority of its military capabilities and a network of bases stretching across two oceans and four continents. No doubt it was helped in this endeavour by the foibles of others; moreover, there were many Americans who actively strove to keep the United States at home. Nonetheless, when the guns fell silent, this retiring wallflower with apparently few ambitions of its own, found itself in a position of influence unparalleled in history. Little wonder that Washington now came to be known by some as the new Rome, and its Chief Executive spoken of more often than not as the 'Imperial' President.<sup>49</sup>

Nor did the Cold War do much to halt America's upward mobility. If anything, this often dangerous and costly conflict afforded the United States many important opportunities; and in this, ironically, it was much helped by the activities of its chief rival, the Soviet Union. The Soviet threat was real enough. That much is obvious from any reading of the new primary

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<sup>49</sup> The best short description of the US power position in 1945 is by Donald W. White, 'The nature of World Power in American History: An Evaluation at the End of World War Two', *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 11, No. 3, 1987, pp. 181 - 202.

sources.<sup>50</sup> Yet the USSR's often brutal and sometimes ill-judged actions not only did little to weaken the West but in many vital respects helped shape and define it.<sup>51</sup> As Truman readily conceded, Stalin was in his own way as much a western asset as he was an American enemy. Indeed, Soviet actions not only helped US leaders mobilize America's vastly superior capabilities against what turned out to be a most incomplete superpower rival, but over time provided them with almost the most perfect of all imperial ideologies. For if the Soviet Union was a menace to the whole of the free world - as cold warriors claimed - then this demanded nothing less than a global response. Moreover, if the menace took several forms, then the US would have to develop the capabilities and policies needed to counter this, from building extensive international alliances and extending military aid to the far corners of the globe, to reconstructing the global economy and taking the lead role in those various multilateral institutions that would ensure its healthy development. In these various overlapping ways, the United States managed to extend its reach to every part of the free world. Of course, *Pax Americana* did not manage to penetrate everywhere. Nor did its economic position go unchallenged. In fact, for most of the 1970s and 1980s, many pundits assumed it was rapidly falling behind its more competitive allies in Europe and Japan.<sup>52</sup> No matter. By the time the edifice of the Cold War came tumbling down, the United States - and the United States alone - still possessed what others lacked: a series of embedded assets that gave it true global reach.<sup>53</sup> As one of the more celebrated (liberal) theorists of the new American empire has recently remarked, what word other than Empire can

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<sup>50</sup> See the 13 Bulletins of the important *Cold War International History Project* based at the Woodrow Wilson Center, Washington D.C.

<sup>51</sup> A point made often by George F. Kennan, the architect of containment. See my 'George F. Kennan: Requiem for a Cold Critic, 1945-1950', *Irish Slavonic Studies*, 1990.

<sup>52</sup> See my 'Whatever Happened to American Decline? International Relations and the New United States Hegemony', in *New Political Economy*, Vol. 6, No. 3, 2001, pp. 311 - 340.

<sup>53</sup> See for example, Susan Strange, 'The Future of the American Empire', *Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 42, No.1, 1988, pp. 1 - 18, and Stephen Gill, *American Hegemony and the Trilateral Commission* (Cambridge: Cambridge University press, 1990).



fully encompass the awesome thing that became the American international order with its host of dependent allies, its vast intelligence networks, its 'five global military commands', its more than one million men and women 'at arms on five continents', and its 'carrier battle groups on watch in every ocean?' None at least that he could think of.<sup>54</sup>

It was at this precise point in time that we can begin to trace the sources of what is now referred to as the 'new' American Empire. It is an act in two parts. Part one was played out in the 1990s, a period according to the conventional wisdom that was marked by drift, indecision and a lack of grand strategy. But as has been recently shown, the more we look at the so-called lost decade, the more we discover the opposite of what many pessimists claimed at the time and what some pundits have argued since.<sup>55</sup> Thus far from retreating as some assumed it would, the US actually did the opposite (especially in the realm of international economics); and instead of losing direction as some predicted it might, by the end of the 1990s it had become far more self-confident - in part because of the collapse of Soviet power, in part because Europe and Japan failed to mount any serious challenge, in part because the US maintained relatively high levels of military spending while others did not, in part because of a dramatic surge in its own economic fortunes, and in part because of its continued integration into a set of powerful regional alliances in Europe, Asia and Latin America in which it was the leading actor. Little wonder that by the end of the century we find a whole raft of writers, from the radical left to the liberal middle, beginning to argue, with some gusto, that previous talk about American decline had been so much hot air. The United States, it was now

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<sup>54</sup> Michael Ignatieff, 'Empire Lite', p. 36.

<sup>55</sup> Andrew J. Bacevich, *American Empire: The Realities and Consequences of U.S. Diplomacy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002).

argued, had never been in such good shape. Certainly, as one century gave way to another, the American mood had never seemed so buoyant.<sup>56</sup>

Yet in spite of this, there were some who still felt the US could do much better, or more precisely, could do far more to exploit all these various assets and turn them to American advantage.<sup>57</sup> Reaganite by background, hegemonist by inclination, and keenly aware that there existed a growing gap between US military capabilities and America's ever-expanding global role, the new cohort were determined to remove all the constraints which they felt had been imposed on the last remaining superpower by the 'international community' in the post-Cold War period.<sup>58</sup> Primacy was the name of the game and a new American century the prize.<sup>59</sup> However, the former would mean nothing and the latter remain a pipe-dream without a much greater projection of US hard power. As Charles Krauthammer put it, 'after a decade of Prometheus playing pygmy' the United States now had to act.<sup>60</sup> Some even drew lessons from late nineteenth century to make their case for them. By the end of the 1880s the US, they argued, was economically powerful but internationally irrelevant. Something therefore had to be done, and in the end it was, first by more resolute state intervention and then by some very determined presidential leadership. The lesson was clear: decisive political action was essential again if the United States wanted to realize its full potential. This in the end is why Clinton was

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<sup>56</sup> Bruce Cumings, 'Still the American Century' in Michael Cox, Ken Booth and Tim Dunne eds., *The Interregnum: Controversies in World Politics, 1989-1999* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) pp. 271 - 299.

<sup>57</sup> This section draws heavily from the excellent first-hand description provided by Nicholas Lemann, 'The Next World Order: the Bush Administration may have a brand-new doctrine of power', *The New Yorker*, 4 April 2002. To be found at <http://new.yorker.com/fact/content/?020401faFACT1>.

<sup>58</sup> See the publications of the *Project for a New American Century* at <http://www.newamericancentury.org>. Key conservative figures associated with this very important pressure group included Max Boot, Frank Carlucci, Midge Decter, Elliot Abrams, Robert Kagan, Donald Rumsfeld, R. James Woolsey, William Kristol, William J. Bennett, Aaron Friedberg, Dick Cheney, Donlad Rumsfeld, Dan Quayle, Lewis Libby, Paul Wolfowitz, Fred C. Ikle, Jeb Bush, Peter W. Rodman, and Norman Podhoretz.

<sup>59</sup> See in particular Fareed Zakaria, *From Wealth to Power*

<sup>60</sup> Charles Krauthammer, 'The New Unilateralism' *Washington Post*, June 8, 2001. P. 29

such a disaster. He may have talked about US leadership. But at heart he was a born-again multilateralist who was prepared to stake all on the ability of international institutions to achieve world order. This was a road to nowhere. Indeed, in the neo-conservative vision of an America unchained, even such bodies as NATO could no longer be regarded as being unambiguously useful assets. There was also the difficult problem of Europe. Unwilling and incapable of building a serious military capacity of its own America - it was argued by the new right - had for too long been far too sensitive to the continent's needs. Not any more. In a world where the key threats to global security emanated from outside of Europe, and in which the Europeans were more often than not likely to get things wrong than right (note here their collective failure in Bosnia), there was no need to buy into the shibboleth known as the transatlantic security community. And to be blunt, there were very good reasons for not doing so given the European inclination to resolve problems in just the sort of ways - through recourse to international law and global regulation - that were bound to tie the American Gulliver down.<sup>61</sup>

Long before 9:11 therefore the intellectual ground was already shifting on the right. However, it took the quite unexpected election of a particular kind of President, followed by the even more unexpected tragedy of September 2001, for the balance of argument to shift decisively towards those who had for some time been arguing for a more determined policy. Naturally, forging what amounted to a neo-Reaganite foreign policy for a post-communist world would be no easy task.<sup>62</sup> And as we now know, during its first few months in office, the Bush team ran into a barrage of

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<sup>61</sup> See Robert Kagan, *Paradise and Power: America and Europe In The New World Order* (London: Atlantic Books, 2003).

<sup>62</sup> William Kristol and Robert Kagan, 'Towards a Neo-Reaganite foreign policy', *Foreign Affairs*, 1996.

international opposition to its policies.<sup>63</sup> This is why 9:11 was so important, not because it reduced criticism from abroad (though for a brief moment it did) but because it created an acute sense of crisis which made previously controversial policies now seem far more acceptable at home. If nothing else 9: 11 certainly proved in the most dramatic fashion possible that the world was still a very dangerous place, and that unless decisive action was taken things could easily get much worse. Indeed, the so-called ‘war against terror’ - which soon metamorphosed into something much wider - provided the neo-conservatives, as they readily conceded, with an opportunity of unparalleled importance. For if, as it was now claimed, America was threatened by a transnational and undeterrable enemy with hidden cells here and shadowy allies there who were prepared to use weapons of mass destruction to achieve their theological ends, then Washington quite literally had no alternative but to intervene robustly and ruthlessly abroad. The fact that this might cause resentment in other countries was unfortunate. But this was of much less concern to certain Americans than achieving results. Ultimately, the new right took a quite philosophical view of all this foreign noise. In the end, they reasoned, what would shape international attitudes would not be weasel words but decisive action backed up by overwhelming military power. Situations of strength not diplomatic niceties would determine how friends and enemies responded to new Bush Doctrine.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> I discuss European criticism to the early Bush policies in my ‘Europe and the New American Challenge after September 11: Crisis - What Crisis?’, *Journal of Transatlantic Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 2003, pp. 37- 55.

<sup>64</sup> As Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld put it following the war with Iraq: ‘Being on the terrorist list’ of states ‘is not some place I’d want to be’. Quoted in *The Times*, April 14, 2003.

### ***But is it Empire?***

*“Over the last two millenia the word ‘empire’ has meant many different things to different people from different countries at different times”<sup>65</sup>*

9:11 therefore not only marked a significant watershed in its own right, but was successfully used by those who had earlier ‘spotted’ what one British admirer of American neo-conservatism referred to later as ‘an historic opportunity’ to exploit the possibilities already present in a post-Cold War world.<sup>66</sup> This does not mean the attack was of little importance or that the Bush team did not view the threat of terrorism as being real. Nor is it meant to imply that every member of the Bush administration was now won over to the idea of Empire. That would be silly. What it does point to however is a connection – between a very real trauma on the one hand and a larger game-plan on the other. Nor should this kind of opportunism come as a great surprise to those who know their diplomatic history. Indeed, there has been a very long American tradition of genuine crises being tapped to serve a wider foreign policy purpose. The Cold War was full of them. The very real Czech coup of 1948 for example helped ‘sell’ Marshall aid to a reluctant Congress, the Berlin blockade then convinced them of the necessity of NATO, Korea persuaded a sceptical Truman of the virtues of NSC-68, and nearly thirty years later the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and martial law in Poland helped justify the Reagan military build-up. It is certainly not the first time in the history of American grand strategy when significant events outside of anybody’s control have been used to great effect by those with a pre-existing set of policy preferences. And no doubt, it will not be the last.

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<sup>65</sup> Dominic Lieven, *Empire: The Russian Empire and Its Rivals* (London: Pimlico, 2003) p. 3.

<sup>66</sup> Andrew Roberts, ‘Americans are on the march’, *The Times*, April 12, 2003.

But even if we accept this, and even agree with the judgement that the real issue now is ‘not whether the United States has become an imperial power’ but ‘what sort of empire’ (Americans) ‘intends theirs to be’,<sup>67</sup> this still does not answer the question as to whether or not we should really be employing the term Empire at all. It might capture the current mood. It might even have much to recommend it as a metaphor. But none of this addresses the important issue of appropriateness: and there are some very serious intellectual objections to the idea. One concerns the very obvious fact that the United States controls very little territory itself, another is that if America were an Empire then why has it championed the principle of self-determination, and a third is that if it had the kind of power some now claim it does, then why does it sometimes appear to have less influence over world affairs than one would imagine? A number of critics would also argue that it makes little sense to talk an American Empire under what Anthony Giddens has termed modern ‘runaway’ conditions; and if it did, then how do we account for the fact that the United States not only seems unable to control financial markets but cannot even ‘extend democracy to other regions, to impose its own system on the rest of the world’?<sup>68</sup> These are all fair-minded questions, and cannot be dismissed as some of the more conspiratorially-minded might like to, by accusing those who advance them of supping with the devil.

Let us deal firstly with the issue of territory. It is obviously the case that most Empires in the past, from the Greek to the Spanish, the Ottoman to the Russian, have been defined as such because they brought vast swathes of land belonging to other people under their control. It is equally true that the United States in the main has not practiced such forms of annexation

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<sup>67</sup> Quote from Andrew Bacevich cited in Niall Ferguson, ‘The empire that dares not speak its name’, *The Sunday Times*, April 13, 2003.

<sup>68</sup> Mary Kaldor, ‘American power: from “compellence” to cosmopolitanism’, *International Affairs*, Vol. 79, No. 1, January 2003, p. 1 -2.

beyond its current boundaries. And to some therefore this is proof that the United States is not an Empire in any meaningful sense of that word. This is a fair point even though it might be considered a rather narrow definitional base upon which to discuss and compare all Empires. But even if we were prepared to - just for the moment - this still ignores one rather important historical fact: that America has indeed done more than its fair share of land grabbing. In fact, those who would claim that the United States is not an Empire because it has never acquired other people's territory seem to forget that the nation we now call the United States of America only became the United States of America because it annexed a great deal during the 19th century: from France and Russia (through purchase), Spain and Mexico (by military conquest), from Britain (by agreement) and, most savagely, from those three million native Americans who were nearly all eliminated in the process. Admittedly, this tells us little about how it then used its massive geographical power base in the global arena. Nor can we assume that what it did in the process of conquering the American interior, it would do, or would want to do, to the rest of the world. But it does at least hint at the possibility that ruthlessness and ambition in the pursuit of power and the American experience are not quite so alien to each other as some would have us believe.<sup>69</sup>

Then there is the small matter of Latin and Central America. Admittedly, neither were ever formally colonized by the US. But should that preclude us from thinking of the US relationship with its immediate South in imperial terms? Perhaps so, if you are an American from the United States. But that is not the way most Latin Americans look upon their own problematic connection with their very large and extraordinarily powerful neighbour to

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<sup>69</sup> I discuss this in my 'America and the World' in Robert Singh ed., *Governing America: the Politics of a Divided Democracy* (Oxford: oxford University press, 2003) PP. 13 - 31.

the North. Nor to be blunt do many North Americans. As even the more uncritical of them would readily concede, the whole purpose of the famous Monroe Doctrine was not to limit American influence in the region but to embed it. Moreover, the story thereafter is not one of US disengagement from the region but the latter's more complete integration into an American-led system - one which presupposed a definite hierarchy of power, was sometimes brutally exploitative in character, and was constructed around some fairly typical racial stereotypes of the 'other'. More than that. It was built on the good old-fashioned ideology - much beloved by European colonials - which assumed that certain areas should, of right, fall within the sphere of influence of one of the great powers. In fact, it was precisely because the Americans thought in such terms that policy-makers in Washington (even more liberal ones) rarely felt any compunction in intervening in the region whenever and wherever they saw fit. If this was not imperialism by any other name, then it is difficult to think what might be.<sup>70</sup>

However, there still remains the more general question about territory and the degree to which America's overall lack of territorial ambition means we should either not use the term or only do so in the most qualified fashion possible. There is no unambiguously straightforward answer. In the end it very much depends on whether or not territory, and territory alone, constitutes the basis of Empire. Many would insist that it does. Dominic Lieven, for example, has argued that 'there has to be some sort of direct rule over the dominion for a power to be classified as an empire'.<sup>71</sup> Others however would point to the complex forms which all Empires have taken through time; indeed, a study of the most developed would indicate that

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<sup>70</sup> The presidential champion of self-determination, Woodrow Wilson, sanctioned the use of military force to the 'South' on nearly ten occasions during his period in the White House.

<sup>71</sup> Dominic Lieven, 'The Concept of Empire', *Fathom: the source for online learning*. See <http://www.fathom.com/feature/122086>.



they have invariably combined different forms of rule, none more successfully than America's presumed predecessor, Great Britain. As the famous Gallagher and Robinson team showed in their justly celebrated work, British imperialism entertained both formal annexation and informal domination, direct political rule and indirect economic control. The real issue for the British therefore was not the means they employed to secure the outcomes they wanted, but the outcomes themselves.<sup>72</sup> Thus if one could create a system overall that guaranteed the right results - which for Britain meant a stable international space within which its goods could find a market and its capital a profitable home - then that was perfectly fine. And what was fine for the British, it could be argued, has been equally fine for the Americans. In fact, not only did they adopt a similar set of criteria after 1945 by which to measure success, many of its more able leaders like Dean Acheson were great admirers of the British Empire. The British, he felt, had done a very good job in the 19<sup>th</sup> century defending the world trade system by pumping their surplus capital into other countries; and there was no reason why the United States with its vast wealth and enormous power after World War II should not do the same. In many ways, it had no real alternative in his view. For as he argued at the time, global order presupposed power, power resided with states, and it was up to the strongest state - the hegemon to use the jargon - to pay the bills and enforce the rules of the game. And if it did not do so (as it had failed to do in the inter-war period) then the international system was doomed.<sup>73</sup>

Of course, nobody would be so foolish as to suggest that the United States achieved total control of the whole world as a result. Nor did it always get its

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<sup>72</sup> See John Gallagher and Ronald Robinson, 'The Imperialism of Free Trade', *Economic History Review*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ser., Vol. 6, No. 1, 1953, pp. 1 - 25

<sup>73</sup> This point is outlined in terms of IR theory by Robert Gilpin, *Global Political Economy: Understanding the International Economic Order* (Princeton University Press, 2001) pp. 97 - 102.

own way, even with the most dependent of its allies.<sup>74</sup> Nonetheless, it still achieved a very great deal and did so in a quite conscious fashion. Indeed, in a relatively space of time, following what amounted to a thirty year crisis, it managed to construct the basis for a new international order within which others - old enemies and traditional rivals alike - could successfully operate. But not only did they manage to operate; the international economy as a whole flourished, to such an extent that between 1947 and 2000 there was a 20 fold increase in the volume of world trade and 700% rise in gross world product. And the US achieved all this under the most testing of political conditions with all sorts of ideological 'barbarians' constantly trying to pull down what it was attempting to build.<sup>75</sup> So successful was it in fact, that after several years of costly stand-off it even began to push its various rivals back - initially in the contested and unstable Third World, then in Eastern Europe, and finally in the enemy's heartland itself. Not for it therefore the Roman fate of being overrun by the Mongol Hordes or the British experience of lowering the flag in one costly dependency after another. On the contrary, by the beginning of the 1990s, the American Empire faced neither disintegration nor imperial overstretch, but found itself gazing forth upon a more open, seemingly less dangerous world in which nearly all the main actors (with the exception of a few rogue states) were now prepared to accept its terms and come under its umbrella. Clearly, there was to be no 'fall' for this particular Empire.<sup>76</sup>

But this still leaves open the problem of how we can legitimately talk of an American Empire when one of the United States' primary objectives in the twentieth century has involved support for the right of self-determination.

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<sup>74</sup> See G. John Ikenberry, 'Rethinking the Origins of American Hegemony', *Political Science Quarterly*, No. 104, 1989, pp. 375 - 400.

<sup>75</sup> Figures from Martin Wolf, 'American and Europe share the responsibility for world trade', *Financial Times*, April 23, 2003.

<sup>76</sup> See the chapter on 'Imperial Anticolonialism' in William Appleman Williams, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy* (Cleveland: World Publishing, 1959).

The objection is a perfectly reasonable one and obviously points to a very different kind of Empire to those which have existed in the past. But there is a legitimate answer to this particular question - that if and when the US did support the creation of new nations in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it did not do so out of pure idealism but because it realistically calculated that the break-up of other Empires was likely to decrease the power of rivals while increasing its own weight in a reformed world system. As the great American historian William Appleman Williams noted many years ago, when and where the US has combatted colonialism - both traditional and communist - it did so for the highest possible motive. But the fact remains that it only acted in this fashion (and then not always consistently) in the full knowledge that it would win a host of new and potentially dependent allies as a result.<sup>77</sup> Imperialism, as others have pointed out, can sometimes wear a grimace and sometimes a smile; and in the American case nothing was more likely to bring a smile to its face than the thought that while it was winning friends amongst the new states, it was doing so at the expense firstly of its European rivals (which is why so many of Europe's leaders disliked Wilson and feared FDR) and then after 1989, of the USSR.<sup>78</sup>

This brings us then to the issue of influence and the capacity of the United States to fashion outcomes to its own liking under contemporary conditions. The problem revolves as much around our understanding of what empires have managed to do in the past, as it does about what we mean by influence now. Let us deal with both issues briefly - beginning with the first question about influence.

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<sup>77</sup> On the uses of self-determination as a means of advancing US influence see Michael Cox, G. John Ikenberry and Takashi Inoguchi eds., *American Democracy Promotion: Impulses, Strategies, Impacts* (Oxford: Oxford University press, 2000).

<sup>78</sup> On British suspicion of Wilson and Roosevelt see Niall Ferguson, *Empire: How Britain Made the World* (London: Allen Lane, 2003).

As any historian of previous empires knows, no Empire worth the name has ever been able to determine all outcomes at all times within its own *imperium*. All Empires in other words have had their limits. Even the Roman, to take the most cited example, was based on the recognition that there were certain things it could and could not do, including by the way pushing the outer boundaries of its rule too far.<sup>79</sup> Britain too was well aware that if it wanted to maintain influence it had to make concessions here and compromises there in order not to provoke what some analysts would now refer to as ‘blowback’.<sup>80</sup> How otherwise could it have run India for the better part of two hundred years with only fifty thousand soldiers and a few thousand administrators? Much the same could be said about the way in which the United States has generally preferred to rule its Empire. Thus like the British it has not always imposed its own form of government on other countries; it has often tolerated a good deal of acceptable dissent; and it has been careful, though not always, not to undermine the authority of friendly local elites. In fact, the more formally independent they were, the more legitimate its own hegemony was perceived to be. There was only one thing the United States asked in return: that those who were members of the club and wished to benefit from membership, had to abide by the club’s rules and behave like gentlemen. A little unruliness here and some disagreement there was fine; so long as it was within accepted bounds. In fact, the argument could be made - and has been - that the United States was at its most influential abroad not when it shouted loudest or tried to impose its will on others, but when it permitted others a good deal of slack. It has been more secure still when it has been invited in by those whose fate ultimately lay in its hands. Indeed, in much the same way as the wiser Roman governors and the more successful of the British Viceroys conceded

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<sup>79</sup> See John Wacher, 2 vols ed., *The Roman World* (London: Routledge, 1990) p. 139.

<sup>80</sup> A term recently coined by Chalmers Johnson in his *Blowback: The Costs and Consequences of American Empire*.

when concessions were necessary, so too have the great American empire builders of the post-war era. Far easier, they reasoned, to cut bargains and do deals with those over whom they ultimately had huge leverage rather than upset local sensitivities. It was only when the locals transgressed, as they did on occasion by acting badly abroad or outside the bounds of acceptable behaviour at home, that the US put its foot down firmly to show who was really in charge.<sup>81</sup>

Yet the sceptics still make a good point. Under modern conditions, it is extraordinarily difficult for any single state to exercise preponderant influence at all times, a point made with great force in both a recent radical attempt to theorize the notion of Empire<sup>82</sup> and a liberal effort to rubbish it.<sup>83</sup> The argument is well made. In fact it is obvious: under conditions of globalization where money moves with extraordinary speed in an apparently borderless world, it is very difficult indeed for any state - even one as powerful as the United States - to exercise complete control over all international relations. There is also the question of its own economic capabilities. The United States might have a huge military capacity. However, in the purely material realm it is far less powerful than it was say twenty years ago - before Europe and China became more serious economic actors - or immediately after the war when it controlled 70% of the world's financial resources. All this much is self-evident and any honest analysis of the 'new' American empire would have to take this on board. But one should not push the point too far. After all, the US economy

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<sup>81</sup> 'Empire is the rule exercised by one nation over others both to regulate their external behavior and to ensure minimally acceptable forms of internal behavior within the subordinate states'. Quoted in Stephen Peter Rosen. 'An Empire, If You Can keep It', *The national Interest*, No. 71, Spring 2003, p. 51.

<sup>82</sup> 'The US does not and indeed no nation-state can today form the centre of an imperialist project'. Cited in John Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000) pp. xiii - xiv.

<sup>83</sup> Joseph Nye Jr, *The Paradox of American Power: Why the World's Only Superpower Can't Go It Alone* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

continues to account for nearly 30% of world product, it is roughly 40% bigger than any of its nearest rivals, the dollar still remains mighty, and Wall Street is still located at the heart of the international financial system. Furthermore, as the better literature on modern globalization shows, the world economic system is not completely out of control; governments still have a key role to play; and the enormous resources at the American government's disposal not only gives it a very large role in shaping the material environment within which we all happen live, but also provides it with huge influence within those bodies whose function it is to manage the world economy. America's control of these might not be complete, and the outcomes might not always be to its liking. But they get their way more often than not. As one insider rather bluntly put it, 'IMF programmes are typically dictated from Washington'.<sup>84</sup> Furthermore, as Robert Wade has convincingly shown, by mere virtue of its ability to regulate the sources and supply routes of the vital energy and raw material needs of even its most successful economic competitors, the US quite literally holds the fate of the world in its hands. This in the end is why the war in Iraq will prove to be so important, not just because it will allow the world to enjoy lower oil prices - though it should - but because it will prove once again that the United States alone has the ability to determine the fate of the region, and by so doing reinforce its central role in the wider world system.<sup>85</sup>

Finally, any assessment as to whether or not the United States is, or is not an Empire, has to address the problem of perception, or more concretely of how US leaders view America's role and how the world in turn looks upon the United States. It is difficult to make easy generalizations. Nonetheless, it would not be a million miles away from the truth to suggest that most members of the Washington foreign policy elite do tend to see themselves

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<sup>84</sup> Joseph Stiglitz, *Globalization and its Discontents* (London: Penguin Books, 2002) p. 24.

<sup>85</sup> Robert Wade, 'The Invisible Hand of the American Empire', Unpublished Ms. 15 February 2003.

as masters of a larger universe in which the United States has a very special part to play by virtue of its unique history, its huge capabilities and accumulated experience running the world for the last fifty years. At times they may tire of performing this onerous task. Occasionally they falter. However, if it was ever suggested that they give up that role, they would no doubt throw up their hands in horror. Being number one does have its advantages after all. It also generates its own kind of imperial outlook in which other states are invariably regarded as problems to be managed, while the United States is perceived as having an indispensable role to perform, one of such vital importance that there is no reason why it should always be subject to the same rules of the international game as everybody else. This is why the United States, like all great imperial powers in the past, is frequently accused of being 'unilateral'. The charge might be just, but basically it is irrelevant. Indeed, as Americans frequently argue (in much the same way as the British and the Romans might have argued before them) the responsibilities of leadership and the reality of power means that the strong have to do what they must - even if this is sometimes deemed to be unfair - while the weak are compelled to accept their fate. So it was in the past; so it has been, and will continue to be, with the United States.

But how then do others look upon the United States? With a good deal of loathing in some quarters to be sure; and rather jealously in others no doubt. But this is by no means the whole story. For while many may resent the metropolitan centre, most are conscious of the fact that the benefits of living under the American *imperium* normally outweigh any of the disadvantages. In fact, this is one of the reasons why the American Empire has been so successful. After all, given the choice of living within its compass or trying to survive outside it, most nations - and most people - have invariably chosen the former over the latter. If nothing else life is likely

to be safer and conditions more prosperous. As one of the more surreal looks at one former Empire illustrated only too graphically, even the more discontented are well aware that life under imperial rule may not be quite so bad as some would have us think. Recall the famous scene in *Life of Brian*. The anti-imperialist leader, trying to stir up revolt, asks his rather small band of followers the following: 'tell me then, what has the Roman Empire ever done for you?' No doubt he later wished he had not asked the question in the first place, for the reply was simple and arrestingly honest, 'well, actually, quite a lot in fact' - from building straight roads to keeping the Huns and the Visigoths at bay, to constructing a decent sewage system through to maintaining law and order. This surely is the issue. Many Empires, including the American, have not always been benign; and they have not always been sensitive. However, the more successful including the American have lasted not just because they were feared, but because they performed a series of broader political and economic functions which no other state or combination of states was willing or able to undertake. Indeed, one suspects that the US still has a very long way to go. For whereas other more formal empires in the past failed in the end because they could not withstand progressive change, the United States will go on and on - or so some feel - precisely because it embraces and celebrates change. Not for it therefore the ignomy of being outflanked by history but the very real chance of being in its vanguard. If the optimists are to be believed, the sun may never set on this modern Empire.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> For an alternative perspective see Donald W. White, *The American Century: The Rise and Decline of the United States as a World Power* (New Haven: Conn., Yale University Press, 1996).



## *The future of the American Empire*

*“Not since Rome has one nation loomed so large above the others”<sup>87</sup>*

*“The American era appears to be alive and well. That encapsulates the conventional wisdom - and it is woefully off the mark”<sup>88</sup>*

This essay began with the 9:11 crisis and went on to do three things: one, explain how and why so many influential figures on the right today are prepared to make the case for a new American Empire; two, suggest that there may in fact be nothing particularly new about the idea of Empire in the United States; and finally try to argue that in spite of its possible imperfections as a concept, the notion of Empire has a good deal to recommend it. Nowhere of course have I tried to insist that the idea is without its flaws. Nor have I attempted to understate the differences between American as a democratic Empire with very special characteristics and other kinds of Empire. What I have tried to suggest however is that by employing the term in a creative rather than dogmatic fashion, it does at least make it possible for us to make useful - and not necessarily misleading comparisons - between the United States and other ‘great powers’ in history. To this extent I very strongly disagree with those who would argue that the term does not enrich our understanding of the United States but rather impoverishes it.<sup>89</sup> Indeed, by making such comparisons we are also able to challenge one of the more restrictive and stultifying concepts that has made intelligent discussion of America so difficult in the past: namely the idea that it is so exceptional that it is impossible to compare it with anything at

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<sup>87</sup> Joseph Nye Jr., *The Paradox of American Power*, p. 1.

<sup>88</sup> Charles A. Kupchan, ‘The End of the West’, *The Atlantic Online*, 18 April 2003. <http://www.theatlantic.com>

<sup>89</sup> See Philip Zelickow, ‘The Transformation of National Security: Five Redefinitions’, *The National Interest*, No. 71, Spring 2003, p. 18.

all. If nothing else, the idea of Empire drags the United States back into the historical mainstream where it should be, and hopefully will remain.

Recognizing the utility of the idea of Empire however is one thing; speculating about the future of Empires is quite a different matter, especially in the American case where so much of this in the past appears to have been so wide of the mark with its predictions of imminent demise, long-term decay and absolute or even relative decline. But it is still something we need to do - in part because it is a good test of our own theories, but more obviously because many writers now appear to think that the new century is just as likely to be as 'American' as the old one. And one can see why. The US economy, after all, is still the most productive in the world, America spends more on security than all the other major powers put together, its cultural influence remains huge and is probably growing, its population is on the rise, and since 9:11 it has demonstrated with some ruthlessness just who happens to be in charge. For the foreseeable future it thus looks as if the US will continue to enjoy primacy. As *The Economist* put it 'the United States' now 'bestrides the globe like a colossus'.<sup>90</sup> Or as an American academic not known for his love of hyperbole observed, 'American hegemony is here to stay'.<sup>91</sup>

Yet we are still bound to ask: is this then the end of real history? Will the future look just like the past? And will nothing arise to wipe the smile off the American face? Possibly not, at least not for a while. But the story does not conclude there. The future may continue to look more like the past than anything else; but that does not mean it will be quite so unproblematic as the more sanguine of Americans now appear to think. However, the new

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<sup>90</sup> 'America's World', *The Economist*, October 23, 1999, p. 15.

<sup>91</sup> John M. Owen, 'Why American Hegemony Is Here To Stay'. Symposium: "*Pax Americana or International Rule of Law*". 16 January 2003. [Http://fesportal.fes.de/pls/portal30/docs](http://fesportal.fes.de/pls/portal30/docs).

challenges will not arise in those ways much beloved of realists - that is with new powers rising to balance the United States or because of 'imperial overstretch' - but rather in more subtle forms.<sup>92</sup> Five at least deserve short mention here.

The first has to do with American power itself. Nearly everybody agrees that the United States has an enormous amount of the hard stuff; and no doubt most Americans think this is just fine and dandy. Yet if history teaches us anything - and if the events since 9:11 teaches us anything at all - it is that those who possess vast power are just as likely to be resented as feared; and if polls are to be believed, then over the last two years there has never been quite so much resentment of the United States as there is today. This began to manifest itself in various forms before 9:11, but it took off with a vengeance as the US prepared to go to war with Iraq. As one American commentator admitted, never had the country gone into battle (with the sole exception of Vietnam back in the 1960s) with so few allies actually prepared to back it enthusiastically.<sup>93</sup> Indeed, never had such a war, even before it began, generated so much global opposition, the overwhelming bulk of it caused less by any sympathy that people might have had towards America's intended target, and more by what many regarded as the dangerously aggressive policies of an over-powered state led by a President with little concern for global opinion.<sup>94</sup> As one friendly European critic remarked, rarely in history had one nation mobilized so much hard power in such a short space of time: and never had it lost so much soft power in the process.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Here see G. John Ikenberry ed., *America Unrivaled: The Future of the Balance of Power* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002).

<sup>93</sup> Fareed Zakaria, 'Arrogant Empire', *Newsweek*, March 2003.

<sup>94</sup> On forms of anti-Americanism see Richard Crockatt, *America Embattled*, esp. pp. 39 - 71.

<sup>95</sup> Charles Grant, Comment at the Centre for European Economic Reform. May 2003.

The first problem facing the United States therefore revolves around the issue of power and the extent to which its own imperial behaviour on the one hand - a reflection of its dominant position in a unipolar world on the other - is already beginning to generate various forms of resistance. This in turn raises a second question about the conditions under which the United States exercises its power. As Nye amongst others has pointed out, America may indeed be the world's only superpower, but this does not necessarily mean it can always go it alone and at the same time hope to maintain friendly or amicable relations with other countries. Coalitions are wonderful things, and coalitions of the very willing even better. But when coalitions are compelled into being by fear rather than consent, then something is not quite right. Of course, the new hegemonists in Washington take a typically hard-nosed view of all this. As they point out, the US still managed to build an alliance of sorts against Iraq; former critics meanwhile are now running for cover; so why all the fuss? The answer should be obvious: because the more secure Empires in history are those which can lead rather than coerce, inspire affection rather than suspicion. And while the United States might still have more than its fair share of friends around the world, it is currently testing their loyalty to the utmost.<sup>96</sup>

A third challenge concerns the United States itself. Views about the last remaining superpower have always been deeply divided and will almost certainly remain so. Nonetheless, for most of the post-Cold War period when the nation was at peace with itself, and liberals of both a Republican and Democratic persuasion were defining the political agenda, international attitudes towards the United States - with some obvious exceptions - tended to be positive. This however has changed since September 11, and has done

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<sup>96</sup> See for example Thomas Risse, 'Beyond Iraq: Challenges to the Transatlantic Security Community'. Unpublished paper presented to the American Institute for Contemporary German Studies, Washington D.C., January 24, 2003.

so in large part not just because of what America has been doing abroad, but because of what has been happening on the home front. Indeed, in the process of securing the nation against further terrorist attacks, America appears to have become a decidedly less open and welcoming society. One should not exaggerate. To talk of a new 'empire of fear', as some on the left have already done, is going too far. However, there are some deeply worrying signs, and if the American state becomes ever more intrusive, and many of its people less and less tolerant, in a world that seems to be more and more threatening, then the great shining city on the hill is going to look anything but in the years ahead - especially in those European countries where anti-Americanism is already on the rise.<sup>97</sup>

This in turn raises a question about the domestic sources of the 'new' American Empire and the policies currently being pursued by the Bush administration. Thus far the new team in the White House have been brilliantly successful in maintaining a high level of support for its current strategy of assertion - largely because the strategy in question has been relatively cost free in terms of American lives lost. However, there is no guaranteeing this support will last for ever. A series of setbacks abroad, another attack on the United States itself, or the feeling that all this was costing far too much treasure and aggravation abroad, could easily see the mood swing back in either a more isolationist or even a less unilateral direction. Indeed, according to one survey, the American people even now seem to have little stomach for going it alone, and this could have consequences over the longer term for the conduct of US foreign policy, especially if the policy failed to tackle the original reasons for going imperial

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<sup>97</sup> On German and French anti-Americanism assessed even before 9:11 see D. Diner, *America in the Eyes of Germans: An Essay on Anti-Americanism* (Princeton: Markus Wiener, 1996) and Philippe Roger, *L'Ennemi Américain; Genealogie de l'antiamericanisme français* (Paris: Seuil, 2002).

in the first place - namely the threat of terrorism. - or worse still, provoked even more terrorist outrages.<sup>98</sup>

Finally, the success of empires in general, and it could be argued of the American empire in particular, has in the end rested on its ability to deliver a bundle of public goods in the form of improved living standards, economic opportunity and growth world-wide. This in large part brought it victory in the Cold War and self-confidence for most of the 1990s. However, as recent economic events developments have revealed only too graphically, none of this can any longer be taken for granted. To all intents and purposes, the long boom is now over. There is massive over-capacity. And the US economy is mired in a trough of debt and deficits from which it seems quite unable to extract itself. To make matters worse, the European economies cannot take up the slack, the Japanese economy remains in a trough, and everywhere there is deep political uncertainty about the world's future post-9: 11. This will not necessarily undermine America's position of material privilege within the wider international system; indeed, a global crisis could easily strengthen its bargaining position simply because it has more political capacity and market space to withstand the shock of a major economic downturn. Nonetheless, it will reduce its ability to shape larger economic outcomes - especially in an era where the Euro is becoming a more powerful international currency; moreover, it could easily lead to that which nearly every economist from almost every country fears most: a tit-for-tat situation with other competitors that could quickly spiral out of control.<sup>99</sup> America and Americans live, in other words, in deeply troubling times where the old economic truths about perpetual expansion and open markets are coming under challenge. In some ways, the modern imperialists

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<sup>98</sup> On this see Craig Kennedy and Marshall M. Boulton, 'The Real Transatlantic Gap'. [Http://www.cianet.org/olj/fp/fp\\_novdec02\\_kec01.html](http://www.cianet.org/olj/fp/fp_novdec02_kec01.html)

<sup>99</sup> On the economic problems facing 'Pax Americana' see John Gray, *Al Qaeda and what is to be means to be modern* (London: Faber and Faber, 2003) pp. 85 - 101.

in Washington could not have thought of a more inauspicious time to start building their 'new' American empire.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> See Robert Brenner, 'The Crisis in the US Economy', *London Review of Books*, Vol. 25, no. 3, 6 February 2003, pp. 18 - 23.