

Alternatives to Empire

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Contemporary Commentary

Robert Kaplan, from *Warrior Politics* (2002)

Historically, every approach in the past to a world society has been the product of the ascendancy of a single power. There is no sign that this has changed....

Our prize for winning the Cold War was not merely the opportunity to expand NATO or to hold democratic elections in places that never had them, but something far broader. We and nobody else will write the terms for international society....

Winston Churchill's most sublime realization may have been that Britain was near sunset, and another stronger and rising power that shared its values was poised to take its place: The United States of America. Churchill saw in Franklin Roosevelt what Neville Chamberlin did not: the great politician with whom he would trump Hitler, afterward allowing Britain to recede gracefully from history.

But the United States lacks that luxury. There is no credible force on the horizon with both our power and our values. The United Nations or a combination of international organizations may one day become that force. But that is by no means certain....

A century of disastrous utopian hopes have brought us back to imperialism, the most ordinary and dependable form of protection ... from violent assault by terrorists and rogue states. Despite the fact that imperialism is delegitimized in public discourse, an imperial reality already dominates our political and economic policies. For the United States, then, the most important decades still lie ahead.

Tony Judt (Professor of History at New York University) from *The New York Review of Books*

Early in the Iraq war, Donald Rumsfeld assured the troops in the field that "unlike many armies in the world, you came not to conquer, not to occupy, but to liberate, and the Iraqi people know this." That is what the British general Stanley Maude said in Baghdad 97 years earlier—not to mention Napoleon Bonaparte's proclamation upon occupying Alexandria in 1798: "Oh Egyptians, I have not come to you except for the purpose of restoring your rights from the hands of the oppressors."

Like the French and British, we count ourselves

blessed with laws and institutions whose incontrovertible superiority places a duty upon us to make them universally available. During his presidency, George W. Bush described America as the "greatest force for good in history," and he promised to export democracy to the Middle East because American values are "right and true for every person in every society."

The challenge facing Americans today is not to find a president who can convince the world that the U.S. isn't an empire, that its intentions are honorable. That argument has already been lost and is now beside the point. Nor is it even a question of choosing between being loved and being feared. Thanks to America's performance in Iraq ... we are neither loved nor feared. We have shocked the world, yes, but few now hold us in awe.

We should not be surprised that America has ceased to be an example to the world. The real tragedy is that we are no longer an example to ourselves. The time has come to recall the admonition of the Gospels: "For what shall it profit a country if it gain the whole world but lose its own soul?"

Reflections

A baby-boomer, I was born in 1951, eight months after President Harry Truman had committed the United States to the defense of imperiled South Korea. I came of age during the Vietnam War and would likely have been drafted into the military once my college student deferment had run out. Instead, the war ended and I began my studies for the ministry. Between the Korean and Vietnam conflicts, I lay awake at night worrying that the diabolical leaders of the Soviet Union would unleash a nuclear attack and ardently wishing that our family had a fallout shelter.

This is the context in which I grew up, and it helps clarify why I have never really thought of my country, *our* country, as an empire. The Korean War, as we know, ended in a standoff with the United States stymied in its effort to reunite the divided nation. Twenty years later South Vietnam fell—a country to which, at one point, we had committed over 500,000 soldiers. And until its demise, the Soviet Union was routinely depicted by America's leaders as a dire threat, both militarily and ideologically, to our existence. Thus I came to see the

United States as an entity of considerable strength and influence, but also suffering from some pretty significant limitations.

During the Cold War era, foreign policy experts used the term “bi-polar” to describe the international scene. Among the community of nations, two grand coalitions vied for dominance: it was the western “free world” versus the totalitarian socialists of the east. The word “empire” was occasionally invoked, but always to describe the intentions and actions of our enemies. According to Ronald Reagan, the communist bloc was an “evil *empire*” out to conquer the world. Mikhail Gorbachev presided over an empire. So did Hitler, Hirohito, Queen Victoria, and Napoleon, but not Ronald Reagan, Richard Nixon, or Jimmy Carter. As Americans, this was not part of our self-image and not a position to which we aspired.

But that appraisal has changed in recent years, at least in certain quarters. Robert Kaplan, whose words you heard earlier, has declared that the “American empire is a given, and the only question is how it should be run.” Similarly, in his book *The Savage Wars of Peace* the neoconservative commentator Max Boot writes:

... the U.S. in the 21st century has power to spare. In fact, the U.S. has more power than Britain did at the height of its empire, more power than any other state in modern times. It deploys the world’s only blue-water navy of any significance and the world’s most powerful air force. Its armed forces have expeditionary capability undreamed of by any other power; its economy, powered by unceasing technological innovation, is the biggest and most dynamic on earth. Its language has achieved a ubiquity unrivaled by any tongue since Latin. Its culture permeates distant lands, and its political ideals remain a beacon of hope for all those “yearning to breathe free.”

The United States, Boot enthuses, is so far ahead of any rival that it is now reasonable to describe the international scene as unipolar, with the world bending to the will of just one nation—ours.

Kaplan and Boot do have a point. The United States possesses a nuclear arsenal sufficient to annihilate any and all enemies. American troops are now stationed in 156 or 81% of the world’s sovereign nations. The American dollar remains the benchmark for global currency exchange and, for better or worse, much of the human species has adopted American tastes, fads, and fashions.

Despite Americans’ historic aversion to empire, this new development has frequently been cast in a positive light. A world in which 200 sovereign nations and thousands of nongovernmental entities contend for power, authority, and influence is likely to devolve into chaos, Kaplan warns. It is incumbent on somebody to take charge—a “great and self-interested liberal power that can advance the interests of humanity as a whole.” It is both our privilege and our responsibility to be that power.

Constitutional scholar Walter Burns agrees. “America is to modern history what Rome was to the ancient world,” he writes. Burns is thrilled by the possibility this affords. With a centuries-long heritage of individual liberty and political freedom, “it falls to us to be their champion,” he remarks.

Our lot is to be the one *essential* country, the “last best hope on earth,” and this ought to be acknowledged, for it is only then that we can come to accept the responsibilities attending it.

There is, as David Armstrong observes, a certain irony about all of this. “We once denounced those who tried to rule the world,” he writes, and now that appears to be our goal.

But whether the United States actually qualifies as an “empire” is somewhat debatable. Having gutted the industrial and manufacturing sector of the economy and ceded leadership in this department to the nations of the Far East, we have watched in dismay as some of our largest financial institutions have imploded. In the process of fighting yet another senseless war we have jeopardized our military preparedness and sacrificed our moral authority with the community of nations. Having vanquished our mortal enemy the Soviet Union, we have managed in just a few years, as Anatol Lievan observes, to “kick to pieces the hill of which we were king.”

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For some, the precipitous decline in American power and prestige is bound to be profoundly disappointing. A significant segment of the population takes great pride in being “number one,” not only the biggest but the best country on the planet. But it’s not at all obvious to me that we ever deserved that status or are worthy to be entrusted with the task of bringing order out of the world’s chaos. After all, we’re hardly doing a stellar job of managing our

own internal affairs. Millions of citizens have been deprived of basic health care, housing, and quality education. We spend more on prisons than on our public universities, and the United States is the world's largest importer of illegal drugs. One is tempted to say, "physician, heal thyself."

Moreover, despite decades of high-minded rhetoric to the contrary, the United States probably does not represent God's most gracious gift to a suffering world. Its advocates argue that the United States was and is determined to be a "benign" rather than a repressive imperial force. But like any powerful sovereign state, we have always put our own interests first, supporting dictators, ignoring democratic allies and exploiting indigenous peoples when it was politically or economically expedient to do so. Truth be told, we have been an inconsistent and lukewarm supporter of democratic principles and human rights for much of our history.

Consider these comments by George Kennan, one of the leading architects of post-World War II American foreign policy, contained in a top-secret State Department Policy Planning Guide from 1948:

We have about 50% of the world's wealth but only 6.3% of its population [Kennan observed]. In this situation we cannot fail to be the object of envy and resentment. Our real task in the coming period is to devise a pattern of relationships that will permit us to maintain this position of disparity.... To do so, we will have to dispense with all sentimentality.... Our intention will have to be concentrated everywhere on our immediate national objectives.... We should cease to think in terms of vague, unreal objectives such as human rights, the raising of living standards, and democratization. The day is not far off when we are going to have to deal in straight power concepts. The less we are hampered by idealistic notions, the better.

Now, there is nothing inherently wrong with a nation pursuing its own self-interest. From time immemorial human societies have contended for land, resources, power, and riches and until the era of sovereign states ends and a bona fide *world* community emerges, this isn't going to change. But at least let's be honest about our motives. We enjoy our current high standard of living and want leaders who are committed to maintaining it. Americans might well express support for a foreign policy that fosters democracy and protects human rights—as

long as said policies don't require any material sacrifice on our part. When push comes to shove I suspect most would agree with Kennan that "the less we are hampered by idealistic notions, the better."

The inconsistency with which the United States has applied its own stated principles has not helped our reputation abroad. As international relations expert Parag Khanna, puts it, "Half the world now regards us as hypocritical and the other half sees us as profoundly unpredictable and threatening." To the extent that we were once regarded by people abroad as a "beacon of hope," we are much less so today. As our own credibility has declined, our democratic allies and many of our rivals have boldly begun to call their own shots, create their own alliances and determine their own destiny. At this point, there is very little we can do to deter them.

But perhaps we ought to be grateful that America's brief flirtation with empire ended as quickly as it did. Perhaps our failures will cause us humbly to remember that, as Alan Ryan remarks, "The U.S. became a great power not by building bigger and better weapons than anyone else but by inspiring the talented and the energetic to join in the American experiment."

Perhaps it was a grand illusion all along that with the end of the bipolar era we had entered a unipolar period of history. In a complex global economy many centers of power exist over which any single nation, however powerful, can have only limited influence.

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China, India, the European Union, Russia, OPEC, Brazil are all forces to be reckoned with. The reality is that ours is now a *multipolar* world in which unilateral demands made by an old-style imperial authority are unlikely to be heeded. "Command and control" isn't the only solution to chaos. Negotiation, compromise, give-and-take, and the cultivation of good will between various parties can also prove successful. We should give it a try.

Franklin D. Roosevelt presided over a difficult period in U.S. history that culminated with America at the forefront of the free world. Nevertheless, Roosevelt never assumed that this gave us the license to dictate terms. To the end he remained firmly committed to multi-lateralism, believing this was not only good for the world but

good for us as well. Reflecting on Roosevelt's legacy, Michael Ignatieff remarks,

Without friends and dreams of service the soldiers sweating in their body armor are defending nothing more than power. And power without legitimacy, without support, without the world's respect and attachment, cannot endure.

Ignatieff's comment suggests that the end of Empire affords us the opportunity to recover our nation's soul. Whatever its advantages might be, empire invariably serves to corrupt its advocates and supporters. In addition to their jingoistic pride, such people—be they British, French, Germans or Americans—eventually develop an inflated sense of privilege and entitlement. Superior power and resourcefulness gives Empire the right to claim the lion's share of the earth's wealth. If others can't compete, it simply proves their inferiority and lack of determination. Inequality and empire go hand-in-hand.

Empire also leads to complacency and willful ignorance. When you think you're fully in charge, it's much easier to discount other people and other cultures and regard them with indifference. I don't really *need* those people, so there's no reason to *know* about them. This may help to explain why Americans, relative to their European and East Asian counterparts, are so woefully uninformed about world history, geography, and other people's ways of life.

And then there is the issue of fear. Paradoxically, as the power of the United States has increased, so has the apprehension of its citizens. We are well aware of the lengths to which opportunistic politicians have gone since 9/11 to maintain and exploit that fear. Resentful and potentially hostile entities surround us, they warn. We need to be hyper-vigilant and exercise extraordinary care. The White House must have the authority to curtail rights, torture suspects, and launch preemptive attacks so that Americans can be "protected."

This is par for the course psychologist Robert J. Lifton points out. Empires cannot betray any weakness, and so they turn their overwhelming power and authority to the task of achieving invulnerability. Citizens are required to make all sorts of concessions, practical and moral, in exchange for perfect safety. Ultimately, this creates a very dysfunctional society because fear, as David Korten writes,

... causes a regression to a more primitive consciousness and increases susceptibility to manipulation by advertisers and demagogues who seem instinctively to speak to our fears and insecurities.... The culture and institutions of Empire feed on and reward psychological immaturity and dysfunction and reproduce it from generation to generation....

For a number of compelling reasons—political, economic, psychological, and moral—America's dreams of empire have not panned out. On the contrary, they have had a profoundly deleterious effect on our nation's fortunes. Only time will tell whether a new administration with a less grandiose agenda will be able to turn things around. Much will depend on whether our leaders can produce a shift in the sentiments of a large segment of the electorate. Americans must be persuaded to abandon nationalistic pretension in favor of an enlightened and generous patriotism. Nationalism, political philosopher Jean Elshtain writes,

expresses the conviction that America must be superior, dominant, and hold sway, and that her citizens must not criticize her for fear of giving aid and comfort to the enemy.... By contrast, the patriot seeks to help America stand as a beacon of hope and tries to protect a way of life, but not to impose it on others.

When a solid majority of its citizens have become patriots in this sense, we will know that the United States has truly come of age.