

The Nation.

Totem and Taboo

By RONALD STEEL

IT DID NOT TAKE LONG for a term that not long ago was slanderous to become a cliché. Suddenly everyone has discovered, and accepts as a commonplace, that the United States possesses an empire. For some our newly acknowledged imperial status is a source of celebration, for others of lamentation, but it is in any case something that cannot be denied. It is no longer even a choice, but rather a simple reality.

Of course the United States is an empire, and in most respects the most powerful that the world has ever seen. Given the current global balance of power—where the only serious rival has self-destructed, and aspirants to the title have a long way to go before being considered seriously--there is nothing else that it can be. Even an American government that tried to practice restraint, self-denial and mutuality would still be the dominant factor in any political equation. It sets the agenda even by its absence. Consider the cases of Bosnia, where the bloodshed did not end until the United States intervened, and Rwanda, and today Sudan, where it continued unabated because the United States chose to stand aside. Not to mention, of course, Iraq, where the American government launched a war that it calls "preventive" but the rest of the world views as simple aggression. A nation possessing this kind of power—the world's dominant economy, the currency with which the world reckons and pays its bills, the most powerful armed force with bases around the globe and a budget that nearly exceeds that of all other nations combined, and with a messianic desire to spread its ideology and to mold the lives and minds of the rest of the world in its image—is by any honest reckoning an imperial state.

The empire is what it is, and the power realities will not be greatly different even if the name is euphemized and the personalities who direct it are changed. How long it will last rests in good measure on how well it is managed. At the moment the prognosis does not seem promising. We are in the early stages of imperial self-

recognition. Americans are only just beginning to understand the role their nation plays in the world, and the price incurred by that role. That acknowledgment is late in coming because we have been brought up on an image of ourselves as rebellious colonists winning liberation from the clutches of imperial Europe.

Our sense of aggrieved innocence usefully masks the violence of our own history and the motivations for many of our foreign wars. But this is not generally taught in our textbooks. Some argue, as does British economic historian Niall Ferguson in *Colossus*, his rhapsody to the imperial tradition, not merely "that the United States is an empire but that it has always been an empire." He rightly observes that the American nation was no sooner founded than its leaders embarked on an energetic program of expansion that—through diplomacy, conquest and theft from its original inhabitants—brought into the ever-expanding Union all the lands east of the Mississippi, then the vast territories of Louisiana, followed by Texas and a third of Mexico, the Pacific Northwest, Alaska, Caribbean and Pacific islands seized from Spain, and the once-independent kingdom of Hawaii. Not to mention the informal economic empire in Latin America, about which a US secretary of state declared in 1895, "today the United States is practically sovereign on this continent, and...its fiat is law upon the subjects to which it confines its interposition."

Our empire did not become global until 1945, when the defeat and the ensuing political and economic collapse of the great imperial powers—Germany, Britain, France and Japan—shattered the existing global balance. The United States emerged from World War II with overwhelming power and an expansive self-confidence. It had grown enormously richer during the war, shedding the self-doubt and overcoming the economic depression of the 1930s. Backed by a triumphant military machine, it had the capacity and the self-awareness to advance its interests and its values around the globe.

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The awareness of the new role that the United States could play was vividly expressed in early 1941 by Henry Luce, months before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor brought the nation into a two-front war. Americans, wrote the publisher of Time and Life magazines in an essay he modestly titled "The American Century," must "accept wholeheartedly our duty and our opportunity as the most powerful and vital nation in the world, and in consequence exert upon the world the full impact of our influence, for such purposes as we see fit and by such means as we see fit." Even George W. Bush would not have expressed the sentiment so baldly.

The project was not only political but also territorial, and it took shape, geographer Neil Smith powerfully argues in *American Empire: Roosevelt's Geographer and the Prelude to Globalization*, as part of a comprehensive global vision dating back to the early decades of the twentieth century. "The American Century, understood as a specific historical period," Smith demonstrates, "was built with an equally specific but largely unseen geography." In this geography of history, he examines the construction of the imperial space through the influence of Isaiah Bowman, the influential geographer who mapped out for Woodrow Wilson the new boundaries of post-World War I Europe, and for Franklin Roosevelt the American presence in post-World War II Europe and its colonies. More than a biography, this is an intellectually invigorating challenge to the assumption that globalism is a process that can be divorced from specific territorial and political objectives.

If the emerging American empire was not based on the formal acquisition of territory, a territorial concept was inherent in the construction of economic and political control. This was the continuation and expansion of the prewar pattern. Following World War I the United States—unlike its French, British and Japanese allies—claimed no spoils from those it had defeated. Instead it focused on economic expansion (and

continued suzerainty over Latin America). Its goal then, and now, was a global Open Door for American trade and investment.

Following World War II the conflict over the political and economic orientation of Eastern Europe brought about the confrontation known as the cold war. This challenge offered the opportunity for the United States to reorganize the world according to American interests, principles and values. The project, nourished on a series of real and imagined "crises," was an immensely successful and usually stable one that served the interests of both the United States and the Soviet Union. It guaranteed the global interests of the former and the security needs of the latter. This is in large part why the armed confrontation lasted so long.

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, hastened but not caused by the reforms of Mikhail Gorbachev, was brought about not by revolution or military defeat, but by the inability of a sclerotic Soviet bureaucracy and economic system to maintain the military balance of the cold war or to provide a decent standard of living for its people. Within the American government this collapse was not viewed as a completely happy development. It undercut much of the justification for the global military, bureaucratic and industrial structures that had been put into place during long decades of alarm and confrontation. Americans began to look for a "peace dividend."

A focus on neglected domestic needs was not to happen, because American foreign policy was not about the Soviet Union. It was, and is, about advancing the economic and political interests of the dominant groups within the United States. Where this project meets resistance, there is no peace, and there can be no peace dividend. This was true throughout the cold war in conflicts like those in Korea, Vietnam and in myriad interventions, coups and proxy wars like those in Guatemala, Iran, Angola, El Salvador, Chile, Brazil, Nicaragua, Afghanistan, Angola, Lebanon and Panama,

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and continuing through the 1990s in Somalia, Bosnia, Kosovo and Iraq. It is also why there was no significant reduction of the military budget—or of American military forces in bases around the globe. The disappearance of the long-term serious rival made no significant difference in the American project for a world conducive to US economic and political goals. But it did restrict the agenda.

The attacks of September 11 brought an end to what we called, for lack of a better term, the post-cold war world. They shattered the sense of invulnerability that Americans had taken for granted. They triggered an intense national anxiety that gave the government a free hand to combat this new threat, along with an open spigot to the Treasury. The "war on terror" became the ideological replacement for the cold war. It too is global in scope, involves enemies hidden among us who challenge our beliefs and values and will use any weapons against us and our allies. It is a war that is said to require a "full spectrum" response, anywhere and everywhere. All this is evident in sweeping new programs of domestic surveillance, rearmament, foreign base expansion and military operations launched by the Bush government. This has provoked not only an immense outcry at home and abroad but a remarkable profusion of books analyzing what virtually no one any longer hesitates to describe as America's imperial adventure.

These books are of two kinds. First there are those that benignly view George W. Bush's initiatives as a radical departure from an American foreign policy based on multilateralism, alliances and consensus. Then there are those that see it as a manifestation of the policies of expansion and unilateralism that are inherent in a longstanding imperial project. The former approach is evidenced in a series of lamentations from within what could be called the foreign policy "community" of journalists, scholars, think-tank analysts and former government officials who are distressed by the Bush Administration's crude style and its egregious alienation of

old allies. Although many are liberals, some are conservatives, in the old bipartisan sense of the term. Their complaints show a serious degree of rumbling within the American establishment.

Take Clyde Prestowitz, for example. Here is a conservative economic analyst who served in the government under Reagan and describes Bush's foreign policy as not conservative at all but dangerously radical. Denouncing the Administration for its unilateralism, militarism, alienation of traditional allies and contempt for international institutions and agreements, he even titles his book *Rogue Nation* (though with the qualifying subtitle *American Unilateralism and the Failure of Good Intentions*). While this dissonance may be standard fare on the left, it is a sign of real distress coming from the moderate right that shows cracks in the old foreign policy consensus.

A similar sense of alienation is displayed with brio by veteran journalist John Newhouse in *Imperial America: The Bush Assault on the World Order*. A Washington insider with ready access to policy-makers, Newhouse shows how Bush and Cheney's preoccupation with Saddam Hussein dominated an agenda already heavy with more serious issues in such places as Pakistan, Kashmir and the Arab-Israeli fuse box, not to mention the botched "war on terror." The greatest value of this short book lies in the author's sure sense of the play of politics and personalities in the imperial capital, and of how a band of zealots has taken over the controls of the ship of state.

Benjamin Barber's *Fear's Empire* is not so much about fear as it is an attack on those "eagles" in the Bush Administration, headed by a President eager to apply "missionary rationales for and military solutions to the challenges to global insecurity," whose "self-righteous wrath is steeped in the lore of American exceptionalism." In place of the doctrine of preventive war Barber proposes a "preventive democracy" based on law, cooperative alliances and internationalism.

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His is a worthy prescription, but one unlikely to make much impact on policy-makers either within the Administration or on the outside seeking to replace it.

No one exemplifies the centrist foreign-policy consensus better than Zbigniew Brzezinski. National Security Adviser to Jimmy Carter, cold war hawk, conservative Democrat, hardball bureaucratic player, he understands power and is not averse to applying it. Neither on the right nor the left, he is an experienced and intelligent foreign policy professional. It is therefore the impeccable provenance of *The Choice* rather than its tame prescription that makes his critique interesting. Like the internationalist that he is, Brzezinski takes the Bush Administration to task for its unilateralism and its adventurism. This book clearly shows trouble brewing within the establishment. Whether this has any effect on policy remains to be seen. The most disturbing question he raises—though, unfortunately, without pursuing it—is whether the current drive for "global hegemony could endanger American democracy itself."

What is most striking about these expressions of alarm from home and abroad is the Bush Administration's indifference to them. What critics disparage as messianism, contempt for the opinion of others, unilateralism, arrogance and an emphasis on military force are what George W. Bush views as righteous patriotism. That is the central message of *America Unbound: The Bush Revolution in Foreign Policy*. Rejecting the popular assumption that it is Dick Cheney, or the gaggle of neocons perched in the Pentagon, or Bible-thumping preachers who set the agenda, Ivo Daalder and James Lindsay energetically argue that Bush is a man sure of his convictions and with little concern for those whose sensibilities he may offend.

The authors, former Clinton staffers currently at Washington think tanks, portray Bush as an intelligent man who believes that because America's (i.e., his own) motives are only to spread freedom and peace, he

must follow his own way unconstricted by international protocols or the opinions of others. "At some point we may be the only ones left," as Bush has acknowledged. "That's OK with me. We are America." In Daalder and Lindsay's view, Bush is governed by his convictions that the world is dangerous, that power exercised in a just cause need suffer no restraints, that a determined will is crucial to the exercise of power and that treaties and accords matter only insofar as they clearly serve American interests.

While all may not share their high estimation of Bush's intelligence, for those seeking to understand the Bush foreign policy and not merely to denounce it, this informative book will be highly useful. In the authors' view he is nobody's puppet, but rather the architect of his foreign policy—whatever one may think of that policy. Although they make a spirited argument, they are unlikely to persuade radical critics who see the current policy not as an aberration of a single team or individual but as a heavy-handed manifestation of a longstanding imperial project. For them the problem is not Bush but the structure of American capitalism and the militarism that produces, and indeed requires, such policies.

In *The Sorrows of Empire* Chalmers Johnson expands the analysis of *Blowback*, his earlier study of the unintended consequences of American overseas activities, to examine the global imperial agenda. He is particularly instructive in this enormously useful study on the structure of secret programs abroad financed through "black budgets," on "humanitarian imperialism" as a pretext for global intervention, on the institutions of American militarism, on the hidden agendas of globalization, on the private military contractors who build and run the overseas bases and prisons, on the actual structure and operations of the more than 725 American bases around the world, on the politics of oil and gas in the Caspian Basin and on the dominant political, military and economic presence in the states of the

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Persian Gulf. This highly useful study is a fine guide to the way the empire works.

Noam Chomsky, who has produced a shelf of books on the subject of American imperialism, may no longer be able to surprise. But he does have the ability to zero in unerringly on the lies and distortions the government uses to sell its policies, and on the realities ignored or buried by the media. In *Hegemony or Survival* he argues that America's effort to "maintain its global dominance and military supremacy forever" threatens human survival. While this apocalyptic scenario may seem a long stretch to many, the book, with its wealth of information, is a thoughtful, well-argued antidote to the conventional wisdom. Chomsky, whether one agrees with him or not, is a national resource, never afraid to challenge power, and is solidly within the honored tradition of American radicalism.

In a similar mode of accusation David Harvey, a scholar of anthropology and geography, charges in *The New Imperialism* that the Bush Administration has used the Iraq war to implement its "geopolitical vision...to control the whole globe militarily and, through oil, economically." This stylistically dense essay is neo-Marxist in tone and mode of analysis. But Harvey also has a practical sense of politics and recognizes that a "more benevolent imperial trajectory than the raw militaristic imperialism currently offered up by the neoconservative movement" will come, if at all, not from without but from within, and that "anti-Americanism from the rest of the world will not and cannot help."

For a specific investigation of the region that so puzzles and troubles our policy-makers, a good place to start is Rashid Khalidi's *Resurrecting Empire*. With a deep knowledge of the Middle East and a felicitous literary style, Khalidi, a professor of Middle Eastern history at Columbia University, examines the history of US involvement in the area against the backdrop of European colonialism and shows why an assertion of our good intentions has little meaning for

peoples who have known two centuries of foreign occupation and domination. He also provides helpful insights into the geostrategic and geoeconomic interests that lie at the heart of the mounting conflict between Islam and the West. Linking America's role today to that of its European imperial predecessors, he argues that the central problem is the "irresoluble contradiction between the imperial center's absolute need for control...and the irrepressible desire of the peoples of the Middle East to throw off that control."

While the struggle between these forces may go on for a long time, it seems unlikely to involve any more Iraq-style adventures in the foreseeable future. Imperial fatigue has already set in among Americans, and economic bankruptcy looms on the horizon as the price for a global War Against Evil. There were "no more Vietnams" after the US foreign policy establishment was bloodied by that colonial adventure, and there are unlikely to be any more Iraqs now that the Administration's tortured case for the current war has fallen apart. Targeted nations like North Korea, Iran and Syria—so authoritatively analyzed, respectively, by Bruce Cumings, Ervand Abrahamian and Moshe Ma'oz in their informative study *Inventing the Axis of Evil*—may have to self-destruct on their own.

Amid a welter of books denouncing America's newly acknowledged empire, it is refreshing to come across one so brazenly celebratory as *Colossus*. Niall Ferguson is one of the talented band of itinerant Britons who yearn for the empire their fathers and grandfathers lost, and who have migrated to the United States in search of one to which they can attach themselves. Their enthusiasm for the United States to assume its "imperial responsibilities" is reflected in their ardent support for the Iraq war and their impatience with, even their scorn for, the doubters. They play that role much better than the dour promoters and strategists within the Bush Administration.

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Although this book, partially stitched together from journalistic pieces, has a patchy feel, it makes its case for a "liberal empire" with a certain zest. Imperial control by a distant power, Ferguson tells us, is a good thing for some new and untidy countries. It teaches them how to run a decent and efficient state. If the instruction has not worked so well in certain former European colonies, that is because "even the best institutions work less well in landlocked, excessively hot or disease-ridden places." And what are we to make of cool and sanitary places like Russia, where democratic institutions also don't seem to work very well?

But even if empire is supposedly good for those on the receiving end, Ferguson has little hope that the United States is up to the task of bestowing the favor. Not only does it lack the will, he tells us, it suffers from an economy weighed down by excessive spending on Medicare and Social Security (though not, he reassures us, on the Pentagon's weapons). "Imposing democracy on all the world's rogue states" would not seriously strain the US military budget, he argues, but Americans are too soft and selfish to get their priorities straight. They apparently don't want to spend their careers administering natives in sticky and unsanitary places. They lack an imperial frame of mind. And so, he laments, the nascent American empire that began so promisingly is likely to end in an untidy and self-indulgent recession.

This, without the lamentations, is pretty much the judgment of Michael Mann, a sociologist who shares Ferguson's land of birth but not his imperial nostalgia. In *Incoherent Empire*, Mann sees his adopted land not as the little train that shouldn't, but as the train that will soon find that it couldn't. The problem, he believes, arises not from the rise of another ambitious great power or from imperial overstretch, as some critics have predicted, but from uneven power resources that will lead to "imperial incoherence and foreign policy failure." The United States would be in "no significant

danger," he says, if it stopped "seeking to drive into the ground the few failing communist remnants in the world, seeking extra-territorial control over oil supplies, stationing American troops where they have no business, invading foreign countries uninvited, and supporting state terrorists."

Well, he may be right. But extending their area of influence and control is what great powers do. It is also what small powers try to do when they can. To behave otherwise might be commendable, but it would also mean a revolutionary change in American foreign policy. George W. Bush may be more crude in his language and his methods than previous Presidents, but he is following the same road map. It will take more than exhortation to persuade him or his successors to do otherwise.

Indeed, it will be extremely difficult, if even possible, to behave dramatically differently. Style is one thing, substance another. Bush offends by his style. He enjoys confrontation and the humiliation of those opposed to his will. Consider his treatment of old allies like the French and Germans in the run-up to the Iraq war. Another President, like John F. Kennedy, would have put the mailed fist in a smooth glove. Yet this, with more nuance, will likely be the path pursued by John Kerry should he succeed Bush. Both his campaign speeches and his choice of advisers reaffirm an imperial role. The difference is a matter of style.

The United States today is what it is, and has been at least since 1945: a great imperial power with global interests to protect and advance. George W. Bush strikes a discordant key. Yet in most respects he sings the familiar tune, and it is unlikely to change in any major way, regardless of who occupies the White House, until the tectonic plates of the global power equation have moved into a new alignment. In the meantime, what we may have most to fear is not major war or crippling terrorist attacks but, as Brzezinski has warned, whether "global hegemony could endanger American democracy itself."