

# An American Empire?

*The problems of frontiers and peace in twenty-first-century world politics*

by CHARLES S. MAIER

ONLY A YEAR AND A WEEK separated the events of September 11, 2001, when Americans felt so vulnerable, from a presidential declaration in which their leaders spoke so imperiously. The so-called Bush Doctrine reaffirms laudable support for democracy, religious tolerance, and economic development, but further claims the right to act preemptively against terrorist states who arm themselves with weapons of mass destruction. We have no cause to be surprised: the Bush Doctrine has emerged from a public discussion by policymakers and journalists that has increasingly transgressed an earlier American taboo: what Edmund Burke would have called one of the “decent draperies of life,” or in this case, of political discourse. Increasingly, that is, Americans talk about themselves, and others talk about America, as an empire.

A decade ago, certainly two decades ago, the concept aroused righteous indignation. How could the United States be compared to Rome—with its conquering legions, its subjugation of peoples, its universalist claims to law and order—or even to Britain, the former ruler of millions of subjects in India, the Middle East, and Africa? If an empire, post-World War II America was the empire that dared not speak its name. But these days, on the part of friends and critics alike, the bashfulness has ended. “The Roman and the British empires have had their day. Why should we begrudge the new American Empire the right to protect its citizens from a jealous and hostile world?” writes a former British European Union official to the *Financial Times*. The historian Paul Kennedy cites the overwhelming preponderance of military power the United States possesses. In full agreement, the Bush administration has vowed to preserve that decisive margin against any rivals.

Except for a minority of tough-minded realists, Americans have tended to reject the idea that our own high-minded republic might be imperial (much less imperialist). Empire has traditionally been identified with conscious military expansion. Washington may have organized an alliance, but it did not seek to conquer territory nor, supposedly, to dominate other societies. President Kennedy, certainly an activist in foreign policy, declared explicitly that the United States did not aim at any Pax Americana. But British imperial historians also long denied that there was any-

thing intentional about the creation of the Victorian domains in Asia and Africa. Modern liberal internationalists prefer to think of empire as the reluctant acceptance of responsibility for peoples and lands who must be rescued from the primitive violence that threatens to engulf them if left on their own.

In fact, some historians of international relations, myself included, have resorted to the concept of a quasi-American empire for a long time. Still, we believed it was an empire with a difference—a coordination of economic exchange and security guarantees welcomed by its less powerful member states, who preserved their autonomy and played a role in collective policymaking. We used such terms as “empire by invitation” or “consensual” empire. What, after all, distinguishes an empire? It is a major actor in the international system based on the subordination of diverse national elites who—whether under compulsion or from shared convictions—accept the values of those who govern the dominant center or metropole. The inequality of power, resources, and influence is what distinguishes an empire from an alliance (although treaties of alliance often formalize or disguise an imperial structure). Distinct national groupings may be harshly controlled within an empire or they may enjoy autonomy. At least some of their political, economic, and cultural leaders hobnob with their imperial rulers and reject any idea of escaping imperial influence. Others may organize resistance, but they, too, have often assimilated their colonizers’ culture and even values. Empires function by virtue of the prestige they radiate as well as by might, and indeed collapse if they rely on force alone. Artistic styles, the language of the rulers, and consumer preferences flow outward along with power and investment capital—sometimes diffused consciously by cultural diplomacy and student exchanges, sometimes just by popular taste for the intriguing products of the metropole, whether Coca Cola or Big Macs. As supporters of the imperial power rightly maintain, empires provide public goods that masses of people outside their borders really want to enjoy, including an end to endemic warfare and murderous ethnic or religious conflicts.

Two kinds of empire existed before World War I: “old” landed empires, products of centuries-long ex-



pansion over contiguous territories (and still largely agrarian and semi-authoritarian); and overseas colonial realms. Among the first group—Russia, Austria-Hungary, the Ottoman domains, China—the states were empires and were vulnerable to new forces of national self-determination. Members of the second group—the British, French, Dutch, Spanish, and Portuguese, and more recently the Japanese, Germans, and Americans—had empires. When the internal crises of the first group combined with the interlocking rivalries of the second, the result was the First World War. Indeed the history of twentieth-century world politics was one long imperial transition—from the domination and then the destructive rivalries of the Europeans, to the Soviet and American spheres of influence that emerged from the Second World War, and finally to the ascendancy of the United States as “the only remaining superpower.”

### The Importance of Frontiers

EMPIRES CLAIM UNIVERSALITY but accentuate divisions between inclusion and exclusion, both on a world scale and within their own borders. Consider these external and internal effects in turn. The principal preoccupation of the guardians of empire is the frontier: what the Romans called the *limes*. The frontier separates insiders and outsiders, citizens and/or subjects within from “barbarians” without. This does not mean that barbarians cannot enter the empire: they can and they do and they are often actively recruited—as professional soldiers in Roman days, as industrial workers, as gardeners and house-cleaners, as hospital orderlies, and also as skilled professionals. But the empire seeks to control their flow from the frontiers of antiquity to the fences along the Mexican border. (The European Union is only a supranational association, not an empire, but it has the same

preoccupation, now enforced at dozens of airports under the provisions of the Schengen Treaty framework.)

A major consequence of this preoccupation with the frontier has been a new political agenda. The salient issues today have shifted from the controversies over distribution that troubled the politics of the West, indeed of developed societies more generally, from the 1950s through the 1980s: income for farmers, the rela-





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tive shares for labor and capital, the creation and costs of the welfare state. They have become questions of citizenship, residence, and belonging: who will be in and who will be outside our politics, and what intermediate rights—such as employment, welfare entitlements, and local suffrage—they might be granted.

Frontiers are important, not only at the geographic edge of empire, but as social gradients within. The distinction that preoccupies contemporary citizens, however, seems less the poverty line—which focuses attention on the deprivation of the least fortunate—than the affluence line, epitomized today by the air travelers' boundary between business or first class and economy seating. Empires can provide increasing welfare for the less well-off in the home society, can advance the democratization of taste and access to education, but at the same time they sharpen differentials of prestige, exclusivity, and wealth. Here is the irony (or the artfulness) of empire: no matter what absolute increases in educational opportunity or income accrue either to the mass of the population at home or the subjects abroad, relative stratification seems to increase—or at least hold its own. Empires reward those who run them with goods, honor, and celebrity status. And for all the disclaimers about the white man's burden or its contemporary equivalent, few of us who get the chance to share these rewards disdain them. Helping to run an empire may not be exactly fun, but it appears to be deeply fulfilling.

Empires mitigate their inequality at home through a two-level management of public life. At one level is a serious effort to debate issues of distribution, environment, infrastructure, and development. This debate is carried on among communities of experts whose decisions must sometimes be ratified by a court or legislature. Those who take part in this "conversation," even if only as public commentators, are convinced that it represents an adequate and a real form of democracy. They denigrate those who are less convinced as populists (which they often are). But empires also operate on a second and more theatrical level. All politics involves some public performance, but empires emphasize dramaturgy. All societies may celebrate prowess, but from the Colosseum to the Super Bowl, in the West at least, empires particularly rely on the sports of the amphitheater that reward star players with fame and fortune. They nurture a culture of spectatorship to create rituals of shared experience.

## Imperial Edges and World Order

IS AN AMERICAN EMPIRE good for the world? And is it good for us? What does an empire mean for international politics in general? Is it a source of order or disorder, cooperation or conflict? There are always powerful justifications for the dynamic of empire: by the second half of the twentieth century, when the United States emerged supreme, the reasons included "develop-

ment" and "productivity." American supremacy quickly developed a clear military component, but it emerged by virtue of more than half a century of economic prowess: the assembly line that turned out Model Ts, the "arsenal of democracy" that armed British and Russian allies and mass produced aircraft and Liberty Ships, that subsidized the reconstruction of Europe after World War II, and commercially developed electronic computation.

This country, moreover, enjoyed advantages of geography and timing. Other countries had been devastated by war, not us. The Soviet Union offered enough competition to thrust Washington into a leadership role that was accepted by its allies, but not enough to overwhelm the American effort. We developed the technology to take a brief but critical lead in the new, decisive, atomic weaponry of the postwar world.

There are always propagandists to point out empire's achievement: recall Virgil's *Aeneid*:

Roman, remember by your strength to rule  
Earth's peoples—for your arts are to be these:  
To pacify, to impose the rule of law,  
To spare the conquered, battle down the proud.\*

J.M. Coetzee's 1980 fable *Waiting for the Barbarians* suggests otherwise: "One thought alone preoccupied the submerged mind of Empire: how not to die, how to prolong its era. By day it pursues its enemies. It is cunning and ruthless, it sends its bloodhounds everywhere. By night it feeds on images of disaster: the sack of cities, the rape of populations, pyramids of bones, acres of desolation. A mad vision yet a virulent one..."

Contemporary history suggests that both Virgil and Coetzee are correct. Empires may have helped to suppress traditional wars in large areas of their domains, although many students of international politics have proposed that democratic states assure an end to war among themselves by virtue of their liberal constitutions, and still other analysts simply credit the balance of power maintained by any large-scale states. We cannot be certain which cause has been operative; nonetheless, throughout the nineteenth century and again after World War II, imperial systems helped to stabilize a balance of power within Europe and North America. An international system based on national self-determination—even though complemented by commitments to collective security, such as the Paris peace conference of 1919 sought to institute—remained fragile and broke down within 20 years.

No stable imperial structures reemerged until the Cold War. Then the Soviet side relied on its own enthusiastic communist cadres and, when these were challenged in the streets, on the calculated use of force: in 1953 in Berlin; 1956 in Hungary; 1968 in Czechoslovakia. The competing U.S. model of a liberal capitalist

\*Book VI, lines 851ff, translated by Robert Fitzgerald

order (or of market democracies) rested on a combination of championing economic regulatory principles (market capitalism, productivity, and growth) and of military prowess. Military action involved strategic deterrence at the European frontier and at the Thirty-eighth Parallel following an open conflict in Korea. But American administrations also intervened openly or covertly, among other places, in Iran (1953) and Guatemala (1954), and unsuccessfully in Cuba (1961) and Vietnam (1963-75).

It remains an open question whether a major imperial structure can ever work through consensual principles or economic means alone. Establishing and stabilizing a periphery seems always to require a military effort: in this sense, Coetzee's bleak indictment is correct. Empire must inevitably generate a resistance that rulers will perceive as shortsighted, bloody-minded, and even fanatic: recall the Jewish rebels at Masada. Our filmmakers may view imperial history through the eyes of Luke Skywalker, but policymakers, or at least their intelligence agencies, tend to share Darth Vader's perspective.

Empire-builders yearn for stability, but what imperial systems find hard to stabilize is, precisely, their frontiers. Historians of empire point out that colonizing countries were drawn into expansion by the disorder that seethed just outside the last domain they had stabilized. But researchers explore less often how staking out a new frontier can generate a further zone of "chaos" that requires imperial policymakers to intervene anew. The Romans wanted to pacify territory across the Rhine. Britain found itself moving ineluctably up the Nile after what it believed would be a limited occupation to sort out Egyptian finances in the 1880s. The U.S. presence in Vietnam embroiled Cambodia. Vice President Cheney warns that once we have helped friendly Iraqis overthrow Saddam Hussein, we shall have to help ensure stability in the country for a long time. But the use of force that stabilizes conditions *within* any given boundary often upsets a precarious peace among the tribes or weakened states that abut the frontier. Can there be successful "nation-building" in just one country? Southeast Asia, the liberated African colonies, areas of Central America, and the Caucasus became in their turn areas of endemic and bloody violence with tremendous human costs. The boundaries within societies can also become sites of conflict and tragedy. Something there is that doesn't love a wall.

Americans today face choices about empire with consequences far outrun-

ning the stakes of any immediate military action. Teachers, scholars, the university more generally can at best help reflect on possible alternatives. The organizations of international commerce and civil society—whether McDonald's, Microsoft, and Deutsche Bank or Oxfam and Médecins sans Frontières—may help enhance world welfare, but they will not assure world order. Empires are in the business of producing world order. But not all orders are alike: some enhance freedom and development; others repress it.

I believe that American empire has served some beneficial functions, above all in opposing far more authoritarian and repressive contenders for international dominance and in defending ideals of liberty and opportunity. Still, no matter how benevolent the intentions, the exercise of empire will generate some violence. The problem is that for every greater inclusive effort, there must still be those left outside the expanded walls clamoring to enter, or those not willing to participate vicariously in the lifestyles of the rich and famous—and those, indeed, embittered by the values of secular consumerism (which contemporary empires rely on to generate public loyalties) and imbued with far more zealous and violent visions of fulfillment. These issues of inclusion and exclusion, belonging and estrangement, the peace of empire and the violence it generates despite its efforts, is what twenty-first-century politics, certainly since September 11, is increasingly about.

Nonetheless, one can choose alternatives likely to lead to less bitterness and less violence. For at least 50 years, Americans sought to exercise leadership by seeking to establish institutions that did not depend solely on our own force: the United Nations, the organs of the Marshall Plan, the North Atlantic alliance, the World Trade Organization among others. Of course, Washington often had to animate their collective resolve. Still, we achieved ascendancy by accepting the need to restrain our own unilateral action (admittedly with significant lapses in our own hemisphere) and generally to persuade allies and neutrals that cooperation did not have to diminish their interests or status. Now, for the first time in the postwar history of the United States (at least for vast regions outside the Americas), our policymakers, elated by supposedly unmatchable military technology, have formally outlined a different vision. Eventually, I fear—if not this year or even this decade—historians will have fateful consequences to narrate if we persevere in this myopic option. ▢

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