

## AMERICA AND THE TRAGIC LIMITS OF IMPERIALISM

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THIS ESSAY ARGUES THAT AMERICAN IMPERIALISM IS not a question, but a reality. "Imperialism" is a loaded word. To call the United States an imperial nation in conversation with an American official, whether a President, Secretary of Defense, or anyone of either official party, would be very impolite. And yet, while imperialism is delegitimized in public discourse, imperial reality defines our foreign policy. The U.S. is more of a military empire than many of us realize.

Let me provide some facts. As has been said many times, the American defense budget is now larger than that of the next nine nations combined. Americans have access to bases in 40 different countries around the world. The U.S. Marines, Navy, Air Force, and Army Special Forces in any one calendar year will operate in 170 or more countries around the world. These operations span from training programs for the Mongolian cross border police to help against infiltration from the Chinese and the Russians, as well as training programs throughout sub-Saharan Africa; to veterinary units in villages in South America as a quid

pro quo for information on Latin American drug lords; to bilateral defense agreements all over the world. In fact, two U.S. Special Forces officers wrote the new democratic constitution for Paraguay in the mid-1990s, when they were there on a military training mission.

When a new American ambassador arrives in a Middle Eastern country, he is greeted by an official from the foreign ministry, sometimes the foreign minister. But when the Commander in Chief of the Central Command stationed in Tampa, Florida flies to a Middle Eastern country, the whole cabinet comes out to greet him, and this is also true in other places around the world. Central Command, which deals with the greater Middle East from the Horn of Africa into Central Asia, is on the point of having more Arabic language speakers than the U.S. State Department.

Since the U.S. is operating all over the world at this level, I think it is fair to describe it as an empire. True, it has no colonies, but then we live in a jet age where borders do not matter as much as they used to. Whether or not you have colonies is simply less of an important factor than in previous centuries.

The word “empire” was never used during the classical era. In his book *The Hellenistic World and the Coming of Rome*, Erich Gruen notes that the Romans never thought of themselves as an empire.<sup>1</sup> Neither did the Athenians nor did the Spartans. The word “empire” just meant the emperor’s foreign policy. The meaning of the word “empire” as we use it today only came about in the early 19th century, and then it was used retrospectively to describe Rome, Venice, and many other empires.

An empire is defined not only by its foreign policy, but also by the style and psychology of its military. The military expert Eliot Cohen notes that a mass conscription army of citizen soldiers are people who fight in a war in which you can make a distinct separation between good and evil, as in World War I and World War II, in which soldiers fought, for

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<sup>1</sup> Erich Gruen, *The Hellenistic World and the Coming of Rome* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

example, to make the world safe for democracy or to eliminate fascism and Japanese militarism.<sup>2</sup> He defined an imperial soldiery, though, as a group of professionals, volunteers, who like the soldiering life for its own sake. When you travel around the various military bases in the United States—Camp Pendleton, Camp Lejeune, Fort Bragg—and you interview, as I have, majors, lieutenant colonels, and others, who have spent their lives going from one mission abroad to another, you meet 30-year-old Americans who have served in Bosnia, Haiti, Somalia, and the Middle East. Often bi- or trilingual, they are much different than the soldiers we are used to imagining. This is their job, and they enjoy it. They are always looking forward to the next mission, and they find themselves increasingly separated psychologically from civilian American society.

An imperial military is not necessarily illiberal or anti-liberal. Often bilateral relationships between the American military and other foreign militaries foster and safeguard democratic transition. Regardless of whether one considers new democracies in Romania, Indonesia, or Ecuador, there are a few factors held in common. First, a restive military must be kept under control, which means providing it with good jobs, nice trips abroad, and new toys. A bilateral relationship with the American military serves this objective. Second, a fledgling democracy needs its military to be kept in check, a goal which the American military can often help by showing foreign militaries how to be good citizens and how to be better, more professional soldiers. Thus, these militaries interfere in their country's politics less often than in the past. When there is instability, as is so common in any fledgling democracy, these military officers who are at once active and restrained about intervening can safeguard the new democratic regime. A contradiction does not necessarily exist between American activity abroad and an age of new democracies. They go together quite nicely.

After a century of disastrous utopian hopes, we are back to imperialism, that most humdrum, ordinary, boring, and dependable form of

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<sup>2</sup> Eliot Cohen, "Twilight of the Citizen-Soldier," *Parameters* (Summer 2001): 23–28.

protection for ethnic minorities and others under violent assault. Both the Nazis and the communists were utopians, because they believed in a perfect society. They imagined it and designed it. One personality trait of utopians is that they assume that anyone who disagrees with them is not only wrong, but also immoral. If someone is immoral, then, they reasoned, they are not entitled to any legitimate protection. Not everyone agreed with them, and they used brutal force against their “enemies.”

During the Ottoman Empire, what provided the disparate, bickering ethnic groups in the Balkans with protection was the Ottoman Sultanate in Constantinople, a figure who was the Hobbesian Leviathan over everything. Since Constantinople had total control, the different ethnic groups did not have to fight about territory because they were all protected within the Sultan’s territory.

In the 1920s and 1930s, Jewish minorities throughout the Middle East, in Baghdad particularly, experienced no problems as a minority in a greater Arab population because they were protected by the British or the French or some imperial power. But when British imperial control started to weaken, a mass attack against Jews occurred in Baghdad in 1941. As the late Orientalist Elias Khoury pointed out, while elites abroad look at imperialism as illiberal and reactionary, minorities under threat have often looked to imperialists as their own form of protection against a larger group.

Were the NATO troops dispatched to Bosnia in 1995 and to Kosovo in 1999 anything other than imperial legions with which the Hapsburgs, the Romans, and the Venetians would have been comfortable? Why was the protection offered by NATO much more real than the protection offered by U.N. troops? Is there something inherently bad or ineffectual about the U.N.? No, although the U.N. has problems and needs reforms. Beyond that, though, a basic philosophical problem exists with peacekeeping. Peacekeeping is no different from war making. Peacekeepers, like warriors, have to totally monopolize the use of violence within a given geographical space, so that only they are allowed to use force and therefore keep the peace, a mission at which the U.N. has been very successful. In places where there has been a peace to keep, where both sides have totally agreed on the modalities, the U.N. force

is more of a formal symbolic mechanism, like in Cyprus, or on the border between Syria and Egypt, in the Golan Heights, and other places.

In places where the peace is not so easy to keep, however, where there has not been such a total agreement, monopolizing the use of force means a willingness to use violence, a willingness to risk a soldier's life for the sake of his comrades. Looking at the U.N. performance in Sierra Leone in the mid- to late '90s, for example, something seems absurd about troops from Pakistan wanting to risk their lives to defend democracy in Sierra Leone, since there was no democracy to keep in the first place, and these troops were from a country that was not itself a democracy. Since the U.N. has no geographical space that it has to protect for its own self-interest, getting U.N. troops to risk their lives in that situation will prove a difficult task. For troops from the United States, France, England, or any country with a muscular imperial tradition that it can look back upon with pride, the task is simpler. The present military becomes an embodiment of that historical legacy for which soldiers are willing to risk their lives in battle. The U.N. can perform this function, but in order to do so, it must rethink and answer a philosophical problem that is in many ways more important than any kind of technical operational problem.

People hundreds of years from now will look back on the United States at the turn of the 21st century and have no problem calling it an American empire. They will compare it to the Byzantines, the Venetians, the British, the French, the Portuguese, and others. This imperialism is most effective and most acceptable if it projects its power through the U.N. and other international agencies, because a country of 285 million people cannot run a world of six, seven, or eight billion people. It is impossible. Such imperialism can only operate here and there in order to get its will. In order to be a mechanism for world order, it has to be a force multiplier of international organizations. Working through international organizations does not mean it gets its way all the time—compromises have to be made—but it alleviates the burden of American power.

A false debate exists between unilateralism and multilateralism. The most effective multilateralism is not inconsistent with occasional

unilateral actions, and often a very sharp, defined, effective multilateral coalition comes about by first threatening unilateralism. In March 1993, when Secretary of State Warren Christopher went to Europe and asked what we should do about Bosnia, he received answers like: “not much” or “we can’t all agree.” That is pure multilateralism, but one can consider a combined approach: “This is what we want to do, this is what we think we ought to do, and this is what we will do, but let’s have some suggestions and cooperation because maybe we can be deflected five, ten, or fifteen degrees.” Any successful foreign policy combines the two approaches and is driven by what the Venetians were driven by—a sense of tragic limits, the acknowledgment that we cannot do everything.

Everyone compares the United States to Rome, but the most enlightened comparison—and the one that would improve America’s foreign policy and make it easier for foreigners to deal with us—is with Venice. The U.S. should strive to be more like Venice than like Rome. Venice’s empire lasted for a thousand years, and it lasted that long because it was built on pragmatism and a sense of tragic limits. Venice was the only Italian city-state that never burned a heretic at the stake. The Venetians were not overly impressed with their sense of moral Christianity, unlike some of the other Italian city-states. Venice was a maritime empire that promoted free trade, so in a sense, it was a liberalizing empire. What helped Venetians get over one difficulty after another was their ability to think tragically, for it is only by thinking tragically that you avoid tragedy in the first place.

Any kind of American imperialism must flow out of America’s nature. What is our nature? The national religion of America is neither Christianity, nor Judaism, nor Islam; it is optimism. In contrast, in political expression throughout American history, what energizes people and protest movements is a suspicion of power. As Samuel Huntington argues, America more or less inherited its institutions from 17th-century Britain. Having begun with an institutional model, all of American history has been driven not by creating power from scratch but by being suspicious of it. If you look at everything from the Vietnam protest movement backwards to investigative journalism to all the attacks on the Bush administration and on the Clinton

administration—it all boils down to a suspicion of power in general. While optimism and a suspicion of power can be very good things, I am going to focus on why they are bad things.

Optimism is the flaw in the neoconservative argument. Neoconservatives seem to think that the American historical experience can be foisted on any country in the world. They think that because we had a certain experience with our form of democracy, if Tunisia, Yemen, or many other countries would only adopt our political model, they would be happy. Since the world is a very varied place, the foreign policy of any American administration should be to expand the boundaries of historic liberalism. Isaiah Berlin defined historic liberalism as the protection of minorities, rule of law, good government, and civil society. However, because the world is so varied, and historical experiences are so varied, the expansion of historic liberalism does not necessarily come about by holding a gun to the head of a leader and saying: “hold elections within six months or we’ll deny you foreign aid.” Yemen held democratic elections at the beginning of the 1990s, resulting in a series of incidents in which thousands of people were killed, and the North had to reconquer the South. The wars between Azerbaijan and Armenia were stopped by the return of power to dictators.

The most liberal-minded ruler in Pakistan’s history since 1947 is the present one, a man who speaks fluent Turkish, whose model is Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. If you look at General Musharraf’s speeches and compare them with the speeches of Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif, two democratically elected leaders, you will find very easily and quickly who is the most liberal-minded thinker. No Pakistani leader in recent history has spoken up so often for women’s rights and minority rights, and against honor killings and blasphemy laws. The fact that he has failed in all of these endeavors is notable, but it is still interesting that he is the only one to speak so forcefully about it.

Tunisia has a security-service thug as the president, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, who took power in 1987. He is not a democrat. He is a dictator whose human rights violations have gotten steadily worse in the last few years. But when he took power, only five or ten percent of Tunisians were middle class; now about half of the country is—that is a great achievement.

There are numerous examples that show that instituting American-style or European-style democracy overnight is not the solution, and yet neoconservatives are driven by this optimism, this sense that because of the end of the Cold War, it naturally follows that American-style democracy is destined to take over. This thinking involves a failure to see the tragic limits of imperialism.

The liberal problem is being too suspicious of power and therefore not always willing to use power. In foreign policy all moral questions are ultimately questions of power. Let me give an example of this.

In the early and mid-1990s, there were four large-scale, ethnic killings going on in the former communist Europe, in Abkhazia, Ossetia, Nagorno-Karabakh, and Bosnia. It was only in Bosnia that the West took action. Intellectuals were much more driven to make moral arguments about the situation in Bosnia than about the other three. The other three were not forgotten; they were sublimated. Why was that? Because of questions of power that had nothing to do with morality. The ethnic cleansings in the Caucasus were certainly destabilizing for the region, but unlike those in Bosnia, they did not threaten to destabilize Europe. They did not result in such substantial refugee flows in central Europe. They did not threaten the very existence of NATO at a time, right after the collapse of the Berlin Wall, when the debate was about whether or not NATO should continue to exist.

After the intervention in Bosnia in 1995, the debate changed from “Should NATO exist?” to “Should NATO expand?” That to me is proof that Bosnia had “Realpolitik” elements to it that are often not noted. In foreign policy moral questions are ultimately questions of power. The ability to use force when necessary and not to use it when necessary is absolutely vital to any kind of moral foreign policy. Let me provide an example of a situation in which moral statements were not backed up by any force or intimidation, and it resulted in hundreds of thousands of people being killed.

In the first six months of the Carter administration, President Carter decided not to take the advice of his National Security Advisor and National Security Council and ultimately let the State Department

drive the policy in Ethiopia, after a lot of hemming and hawing and internal debates. Ethiopia, which was slipping into the Soviet orbit, was not given any carrots or sticks to deflect it from where it was headed. The Somalians, who would have provided us with some means of pressure, were not armed in any way. The U.S. fleet was not deployed off the Horn of Africa. At the end of the day, the administration was left with moral arguments but with no power component. The result was that the new Ethiopian ruler, Mengistu Haile Miriam, went from being another nasty third-world dictator, with an abysmal human rights record, to being a Stalinist tyrant, who, instead of killing a few hundred or thousand people a year, started killing in much larger numbers. By the mid-1980s hundreds of thousands of people had died in collectivization programs known as “villageization” that flowed directly, in my opinion, from the decisions made in the first six months of the Carter administration. This is an example of how a moral foreign policy requires the use of force, or at least carrots and sticks that are very, very real.

If any imperial enterprise is to be successful, it has to recognize limits, which is done by relying on area experts. In writing a book on area experts—about State Department experts in the Middle East—I learned that though area experts often make big mistakes, and you shouldn’t always listen to them, it is impossible to have any kind of coherent foreign policy without them. Area experts are at their best when they are giving you advice about limits, about what is not possible in a given terrain, about how difficult and intractable the local ground-level reality can be.

The best work of area expertise that defines a truly healthy imperial policy was written by a 25-year-old author by the name of Winston Spencer Churchill and published in 1898. It was called *The River War: The History of the Reconquest of the Sudan*, and it was about 800 pages long. The book’s argument can be paraphrased as follows: “The peoples of the greater Sudan are intractable, difficult, riven by all kinds of ethnic disputes. There are a lot of things that cannot be done there. The desert is bad. The climate is bad. Any imperial expedition is going to run into one problem after another, but nevertheless, because it is in Britain’s interest to intervene and do something, it is still worth doing.

All I have done in this book is to give you a feeling for all the difficulties on the ground. In other words, intervention is okay, provided you have no illusions about what you're going into." Churchill exhibited the perfect balance between intervention and non-intervention.

The Euro-American split will not be permanent because a lot of the things driving it are very specific to the times. The United States changed dramatically when it expanded westward. Its politics changed; it became a different kind of country. Europe is going to add a hundred million people to its population over the next ten years. Europe is going to expand eastward like the U.S. expanded westward, and Europe is going to change dramatically. There will be regional states like Moldova and Transylvania in the same way that there are now Tuscany, Catalonia, Leone, and other places. This new part of Europe, which will be about a third of the total European population, is going to bring an entirely different historical experience. While Europeans were demonstrating in the late '60s and '70s, people in this part of Europe were getting up at 4:00 a.m. to stand in bread lines for their children. For people in this part of Europe, World War II did not end in 1945; it ended in 1989. This part of Europe brings an entirely different perspective.

Recently I spent a considerable time interviewing Romanian officials. The Romanian foreign minister said that they will have the luxury of being as critical of the United States as their colleagues in Western Europe after they've had several decades of middle-class prosperity. Until then, they will simply lack that luxury and thus will bring along with the Poles and others, a pro-American critical mass to the European debate, especially in that interregnum of four or five years when these countries are in NATO but not in the EU.

One of the reasons Americans have been so obsessed with why the Europeans hate them is that most of the people in policy positions in the middle and upper levels in any administration are of European descent. In 15 or 20 years, the people in these same positions are going to be the children of Latino, Asian, Indian, or Pakistani immigrants, and they are going to bring entirely different family histories and emotional foci to their ideas and positions.

Europe is going to become more complex. Its cultural identity is not static; it will change as it expands eastward, maybe as much as ours changed as we expanded westward.

The war on terrorism will be very much like the Cold War, or like fighting a disease pandemic. In a disease pandemic, you almost never eradicate the disease; you simply suppress it to such a level that it doesn't really interfere with daily life in any given geographical space. We are not going to eliminate entirely all terrorist incidents and that should not be the measure of whether the war on terrorism is a success or not. If we can reduce these incidents substantially so that spectacular incidents are few and far between, the body politic in the United States and Europe and elsewhere will be able to move on. We should not be fatalistic. Everyone said that the Italians could not defeat the Red Brigades. They did. This war is winnable provided you have a realistic assessment of what victory really entails.

The United States cannot take on the entire Muslim world. We're going to make deals with one element against another element—as we had detente agreements with the Soviet Union, but sided with right-wing military regimes in South America as all part of the process that ultimately led to a victory in the Cold War. That kind of fluent, subtly nuanced policy is ultimately what is going to result. A subtle, multilateral policy will always contain a unilateral element and will always contain a unilateral threat.

The best guide to American foreign policy was provided by the founding fathers in *The Federalist Papers*. When you read *The Federalist Papers* you find out that the American founding fathers were constant worriers; they did not stop worrying. They worried about every aspect of policy, about how a state is organized, how this and that could go wrong. As we all know, it is often the things we worry about most that do not happen. Precisely by being so constructively pessimistic, they were able to produce a nation whose national religion became optimism, because so many of the things they worried about did not happen. The best guide to foreign policy is to think tragically to avoid tragedy.

If the American empire can be compared with any other empire in history in terms of its weakness, its limits, its indistinctness, its resistance to definition, it would be the Persian empire at the end of the Peloponnesian War, when Sparta won the war against Athens. Sparta was so weakened it became more or less an ally or vassal state of Greater Persia. Greater Persia existed from the Greek archipelago all the way to the Indian subcontinent; it looked vast on a map, but it was very weak internally. To do anything, the Persians had to construct different coalitions for every individual initiative. They had to negotiate and make deals constantly. Their strength was their weakness. Compared to many other empires in the past, the American empire is limited and constrained, and that may ultimately enable its power to last over the decades.