

Spring 2005

'We're an Empire Now': The United States Between Imperial Denial and Premature Decolonization

Niall Ferguson
Harvard University

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/macintl>

Recommended Citation

Ferguson, Niall (2005) "'We're an Empire Now': The United States Between Imperial Denial and Premature Decolonization," *Macalester International*: Vol. 16, Article 8.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/macintl/vol16/iss1/8>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Institute for Global Citizenship at DigitalCommons@Macalester College. It has been accepted for inclusion in Macalester International by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Macalester College. For more information, please contact scholarpub@macalester.edu.

‘We’re an Empire Now’: The United States Between Imperial Denial and Premature Decolonization

Niall Ferguson

We’re an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you’re studying that reality—judiciously, as you will—we’ll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that’s how things will sort out. We’re history’s actors...and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do.

A “senior adviser” to President Bush, as quoted by Ron Suskind¹

‘History,’ [Bush] said, shrugging, taking his hands out of his pockets, extending his arms and suggesting with his body language that it was so far off. ‘We won’t know. We’ll all be dead.’

Bob Woodward, quoting President Bush²

*I*s the United States an empire? It is, I have discovered, acceptable to say that it is—provided that you deplore the fact. At the same time, it is permitted to say that American power is potentially beneficent—provided that you do not describe it as imperial. What is not allowed is to say that the United States is an empire *and* that this might not be wholly bad. My book *Colossus* set out to do this, and thereby succeeded in antagonizing both conservative and liberal critics. Conservatives repudiated my contention that the United States is and, indeed, has always been an empire. They prefer to think of it as a hegemon, a superpower, a world leader—anything but an empire. Liberals were dismayed by my suggestion that the American empire might have positive as well as negative attributes. For them, American imperialism can have no redeeming features. It has been and must remain one of history’s Bad Things.

As in Gilbert and Sullivan’s *Iolanthe*, so in the United States today, it seems to be expected, “That every boy and every gal / That’s born into the world alive / Is either a little Liberal, / Or else a little Conservative!” But I am afraid my book is neither. Here, in a simplified form, is what it says:

1. The United States has always been, functionally if not self-consciously, an empire;
2. a self-conscious American imperialism might well be preferable to the available alternatives, but
3. financial, human, and cultural constraints make such self-consciousness highly unlikely, and
4. therefore the American empire, insofar as it continues to exist, will remain a somewhat dysfunctional entity.

The case for an American empire in *Colossus* is therefore twofold. First, there is the case for its functional existence; second, the case for the potential advantages of a self-conscious American imperialism. By self-conscious imperialism, please note, I do *not* mean that the United States should unabashedly proclaim itself an empire and its president an emperor. Perish the thought. I merely mean that Americans need to recognize the imperial characteristics of their own power today and, if possible, to learn from the achievements and failures of past empires. It is no longer possible to maintain the fiction that there is something wholly unique about the foreign relations of the United States. The dilemmas America faces today have more in common with those faced by the later Caesars than with those faced by the Founding Fathers.³

At the same time, however, the book makes clear the grave perils of being an “empire in denial.” Americans are not wholly oblivious to the imperial role their country plays in the world. But they dislike it. “I think we’re trying to run the business of the world too much,” a Kansas farmer told the British author Timothy Garton Ash in 2003, “...like the Romans used to.”⁴ To such feelings of unease, American politicians respond with a categorical reassurance. “We’re not an imperial power,” declared President George W. Bush last April, “We’re a liberating power.”⁵

Of all the misconceptions that need to be dispelled here, this is perhaps the most obvious: that simply because Americans say they do not “do” empire, there cannot be such a thing as American imperialism. As I write, American troops are engaged in defending governments forcibly called into being by the United States in two distant countries, Afghanistan and Iraq. They are likely to be there for some years to come. Even President Bush’s vanquished Democratic rival John Kerry implied last September that, if he were elected, U.S. forces would be withdrawn from Iraq within four years—not, in other words,

the day after his inauguration.⁶ Iraq, however, is only the front line of an American imperium, which, like all the great world empires of history, aspires to much more than just military dominance along a vast and variegated strategic frontier.⁷ Empire also means economic, cultural, and political predominance within (and sometimes also outside) that frontier. On November 6, 2003, in his speech to mark the 20th anniversary of the National Endowment for Democracy, President Bush set out a vision of American foreign policy that, for all its Wilsonian language, strongly implied the kind of universal, civilizing mission that has been a feature of all the great empires:

The United States has adopted a new policy, a forward strategy of freedom in the Middle East... . The establishment of a free Iraq at the heart of the Middle East will be a watershed event in the global democratic revolution... . The advance of freedom is the calling of our time; it is the calling of our country... . We believe that liberty is the design of nature; we believe that liberty is the direction of history. We believe that human fulfillment and excellence come in the responsible exercise of liberty. And we believe that freedom—the freedom we prize—is not for us alone, it is the right and the capacity of all mankind.⁸

He restated this messianic credo in his speech to the Republican Party convention in September 2004:

The story of America is the story of expanding liberty: an ever-widening circle, constantly growing to reach further and include more. Our nation's founding commitment is still our deepest commitment: In our world, and here at home, we will extend the frontiers of freedom... . We are working to advance liberty in the broader Middle East because freedom will bring a future of hope and the peace we all want... . Freedom is on the march. I believe in the transformational power of liberty: The wisest use of American strength is to advance freedom.⁹

To the majority of Americans, it would appear, there is no contradiction between the ends of global democratization and the means of American military power. As defined by their president, the democratizing mission of the United States is both altruistic and distinct from the ambitions of past empires, which (so it is generally assumed) aimed to impose their own rule on foreign peoples. The difficulty is that President Bush's ideal of "Freedom" as a universal desideratum rather closely resembles the Victorian ideal of "Civilization." On close

inspection, Freedom means the American model of democracy and capitalism. When Americans speak of “nation building” they actually mean “state replicating,” in the sense that they want to build political and economic institutions that are fundamentally similar, though not necessarily identical, to their own.¹⁰ They may not aspire to rule, but they do aspire to have others rule themselves in the American way. Yet the very act of imposing freedom simultaneously subverts it. Just as the Victorians seemed hypocritical when they spread Civilization with the Maxim gun, so there is something suspect about those who would democratize Fallujah with the Abrams tank. President Bush’s distinction between conquest and liberation would have been entirely familiar to the liberal imperialists of the early 1900s, who likewise saw Britain’s far-flung legions as agents of emancipation (not least in the Middle East during and after World War I). Equally familiar to that earlier generation would have been the impatience of American officials to hand over sovereignty to an Iraqi government sooner rather than later. Indirect rule—which installed nominally independent native rulers while leaving British civilian administrators and military forces in practical control of financial matters and military security—was the preferred model for British colonial expansion in many parts of Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. Iraq itself was an example of indirect rule after the Hashemite dynasty was established there in the 1920s. The crucial question today is whether or not the United States has the capabilities, both material and moral, to make a success of its version of indirect rule. The danger lies in the inclination of American politicians, eager to live up to their own emancipatory rhetoric as well as to “bring the boys back home,” to withdraw from their overseas commitments prematurely—in short, to opt for premature decolonization rather than sustained indirect rule. Unfortunately, history shows that the most violent time in the life of an empire often comes at the moment of its dissolution, precisely because the withdrawal of imperial troops unleashes a struggle between rival local elites for control of the indigenous armed forces.

But is the very concept of empire itself an anachronism? A number of critics have objected that imperialism was a discreet historical phenomenon that reached its apogee in the late 19th century and has been

defunct since the 1950s. "The Age of Empire is passed," declared the *New York Times* as L. Paul Bremer III left Baghdad:

The experience of Iraq has demonstrated...that when America does not disguise its imperial force, when a proconsul leads an 'occupying power,' it is liable to find itself in an untenable position quickly enough. There are three reasons: the people being governed do not accept such a form of rule, the rest of the world does not accept it and Americans themselves do not accept it.¹¹

As one reviewer of *Colossus* put it, "nationalism is a much more powerful force now than it was during the heyday of the Victorian era."¹² According to another, the book failed "to come to terms with the tectonic changes wrought by independence movements and ethnic and religious politics in the years since the end of World War II."¹³ A favorite argument of journalists is, perhaps not surprisingly, that the power of the modern media makes it impossible for empires to operate as they did in the past, because their misdeeds are so quickly broadcast to an indignant world.

Such arguments betray a touching naiveté about both the past and the present. First, empire was no temporary condition of the Victorian age. Empires, by contrast, can be traced back as far as recorded history goes. Indeed, most history is in fact the history of empires precisely because empires are so good at recording, replicating, and transmitting their own words and deeds. It is the nation-state—an essentially 19th-century ideal type—that is the historical novelty and which may yet prove to be the more ephemeral entity. Given the ethnic heterogeneity and restless mobility of mankind, that is scarcely surprising. On close inspection, many of the most successful nation-states of the present started life as empires. What is the modern United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland if not the legatee of an earlier English imperialism?

Secondly, it is a Rooseveltian fantasy that in 1945 the age of empire came to an end amid a global springtime of the peoples. On the contrary, the Second World War merely saw the defeat of three would-be empires—the German, Japanese, and Italian—by an alliance between the old Western European empires (principally the British, since the others were so swiftly beaten) and two newer empires, those of the Soviet Union and the United States. Though the United States for the most part ran an "empire by invitation" (to the extent that it was more a

hegemon, in the sense of an alliance leader, than an empire), the Soviet Union was and remained a true empire until its precipitous decline and fall. Moreover, the other great Communist power to emerge from the 1940s, the People's Republic of China, remains in many respects an empire to this day. Its three most extensive provinces, Inner Mongolia, Xinjiang and Tibet, were all acquired as a result of Chinese imperial expansion, and China continues to lay claim to Taiwan as well as numerous smaller islands, to say nothing of some territories in Russian Siberia and Kazakhstan.

Empires, in short, are always with us. Nor is it immediately obvious why the modern media should reduce the capacity of empires to sustain themselves. The growth of the popular press did nothing to weaken the British Empire in the late 19th and early 20th centuries; on the contrary, the mass-circulation newspapers tended to enhance the popular legitimacy of the Empire. Anyone who watched how American television networks covered the invasion of Iraq ought to understand that the mass media are not necessarily solvents of imperial power. As for nationalism, it is something of a myth that this was what brought down the old empires of Western Europe. Far more lethal to their longevity were the costs of fighting rival empires, empires that were still more contemptuous of the principle of self-determination.¹⁴

Another common misconception is that the United States can and should achieve its international objectives—above all, its own security—as a hegemon rather than an empire, “relying on soft power” as much as on hard power.¹⁵ Closely allied to this idea are the assumptions that there will always be less violence in the absence of an empire than in its presence, and that the United States would therefore make the world a safer place if it brought its troops home from the Middle East. One way to test such arguments is to ask the counterfactual question: Would American foreign policy have been more effective in the past four years—or, if you prefer, would the world be a safer place today—if Afghanistan and Iraq had not been invaded? In the case of Afghanistan, there is little question that soft power would not have sufficed to oust the sponsors of Al-Qaida from their stronghold in Kabul. In the case of Iraq, it is surely better that Saddam Hussein is the prisoner of an elected Iraqi government than still reigning in Baghdad. Open-ended “containment,” which was effectively what the French government argued for in 2003, would, on balance, have been a worse policy. Policing Iraq from the air while periodically firing missiles at suspect installations was costing money without solving the problem

posed by Saddam. Sanctions may have disarmed Saddam (at the time, of course, we could not be sure) but they were also depriving ordinary Iraqis. In any case, the sanctions regime was on the point of collapse thanks to a systematic campaign by Saddam's regime to buy votes in the United Nations Security Council, a campaign of corruption that was made easy by the United Nations' Oil for Food program. In short, the policy of regime change was right; arguably, the principal defect of American policy toward Iraq was that the task had been left undone for twelve years. Those who fret about the doctrine of preemption enunciated in President Bush's National Security Strategy should bear in mind that the overthrow of Saddam was as much "post-emption" as preemption, since Saddam had done nearly all the mischief of which he was capable some time before March 2003.

Yet it would be absurd to deny that much of what has happened in the past year—to say nothing of what has been revealed about earlier events—has tended to undermine the legitimacy of the Bush administration's policy. To put it bluntly: What went wrong? And has the very notion of an American empire been discredited?

The first seed of future troubles was the administration's decision to treat suspected Al-Qaida personnel captured in Afghanistan and elsewhere as "unlawful enemy combatants," beyond the scope of both American and international law. Prisoners were held incommunicado and indefinitely at Guantánamo Bay. As the rules governing interrogation were chopped and changed, many of these prisoners were subjected to forms of mental and physical intimidation that in some cases amounted to torture.¹⁶ Indeed, Justice Department memoranda were written to rationalize the use of torture as a matter for presidential discretion in time of war. Evidently, some members of the administration felt that extreme measures were justified by the shadowy nature of the foe they faced, while at the same time being legitimized by the public appetite for retribution after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. All of this the Supreme Court rightly denounced in its stinging judgment delivered in June 2004. As the Justices put it, not even the imperatives of resisting "an assault by the forces of tyranny" could justify the use by an American president of "the tools of tyrants." Yet power corrupts, and even small amounts of power can corrupt a very great deal. It may not have been official policy to flout the Geneva Conventions in Iraq, but not enough was done by senior officers to protect prisoners held at Abu Ghraib from gratuitous abuse (what the inquiry chaired by James Schlesinger called "free-lance activities on the part

of the night shift").¹⁷ The photographic evidence of these "activities" has done more than anything else to discredit the claim of the United States and its allies to stand not merely for an abstract liberty but also for the effective rule of law.

Second, it was more than mere exaggeration on the part of Vice President Cheney, the former C.I.A. chief George Tenet, and ultimately President Bush himself—to say nothing of British Prime Minister Tony Blair—to claim they knew *for certain* that Saddam Hussein possessed weapons of mass destruction. It was, we now know, a downright lie that went far beyond what the available intelligence indicated. What they could legitimately have said was this: "After all his evasions, we simply can't be sure whether or not Saddam Hussein has any WMD. So, on the precautionary principle, we just can't leave him in power indefinitely. Better safe than sorry." But that was not enough for Cheney, who felt compelled to make the bald assertion that "Saddam Hussein possesses weapons of mass destruction." Bush himself had his doubts, but was reassured by Tenet that it was a "slam-dunk case."¹⁸ Other doubters soon fell into line. Still more misleading was the administration's allegation that Saddam was "teaming up with al-Qaida." Sketchy evidence of contacts between the two was used to insinuate Iraqi complicity in the September 11 attacks, for which not a shred of proof has been found.

Third, it was a near disaster that responsibility for the postwar occupation of Iraq was seized by the Defense Department, intoxicated as its principals became in the heat of their *blitzkrieg*. The State Department had spent long hours preparing a plan for the aftermath of a successful invasion. That plan was simply discarded by Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and his close advisers, who were convinced that once Saddam had gone, Iraq would magically reconstruct itself (after a period of suitably ecstatic celebration at the advent of freedom). As one official told the *Financial Times* last year, Under-Secretary Douglas Feith led:

a group in the Pentagon who all along felt that this was going to be not just a cakewalk, it was going to be 60–90 days, a flip-over and hand-off, a lateral or whatever to...the INC [Iraqi National Congress]. The DoD [Department of Defense] could then wash its hands of the whole affair and depart quickly, smoothly and swiftly. And there would be a democratic Iraq that was amenable to our wishes and desires left in its wake. And that's all there was to it.¹⁹

When General Eric Shinseki, the Army Chief of Staff, stated in late February 2003 that “something of the order of several hundred thousand soldiers” would be required to stabilize postwar Iraq, he was brusquely put down by Deputy Secretary Wolfowitz as “wildly off the mark.” Wolfowitz professed himself “reasonably certain” that the Iraqi people would “greet us as liberators.” Such illusions were not, it should be remembered, confined to neoconservatives in the Pentagon. Even General Tommy Franks was under the impression that it would be possible to reduce troop levels to just 50,000 after eighteen months. It was left to Secretary of State Colin Powell to point out to the president that “regime change” had serious—not to say imperial—implications. The Pottery Barn rule, he suggested to Bush, was bound to be applicable to Iraq: “You break it, you own it.”²⁰

Fourth, American diplomacy in 2003 was like the two-headed Pushmepullyou in Dr. Doolittle, it pointed in opposite directions. On one side was Cheney, dismissing the United Nations as a negligible factor. On the other was Powell, insisting that any action would require some form of U.N. authorization to be legitimate. It is possible that one of these approaches might have worked. It was, however, hopeless to try to face both ways. Europe was in fact coming around as a consequence of some fairly successful diplomatic browbeating. No fewer than eighteen European governments signed letters expressing support for the impending war against Saddam. Yet the decision to seek a second U.N. resolution, on the grounds that the language of Resolution 1441 was not strong enough to justify all-out war, was a blunder that allowed the French government to regain the initiative by virtue of its permanent seat on the U.N. Security Council. Despite the fact that more than forty countries declared their support for the invasion of Iraq and three (Britain, Australia, and Poland) sent troops, the threat of a French veto, delivered with a Gallic flourish, created the indelible impression that the United States was acting unilaterally—and even illegally.²¹

All of these mistakes had one thing in common: they sprang from a failure to learn from history. For among the most obvious lessons of history is that an empire cannot rule by coercion alone. It needs, above all, legitimacy—in the eyes of the subject people, in the eyes of the other Great Powers and, most crucially, in the eyes of the people back home. Did those concerned know no history? We are told that President Bush was reading Edward Morris’s *Theodore Rex* as the war in Iraq was being planned. Presumably, he had not reached the part where the American occupation sparked off a Filipino insurrection. Before the

invasion of Iraq, Deputy National Security Adviser Stephen Hadley was heard to refer to a purely unilateral American invasion as “the imperial option.” Did no one else grasp that occupying and trying to transform Iraq (with or without allies) was a quintessentially imperial undertaking—and one that would not only cost money but would also take many years to succeed?

Had policymakers troubled to consider what befell the last Anglo-phone occupation of Iraq, they might have been less surprised by the persistent resistance in certain parts of the country during 2004. For in May 1920 there was a major anti-British revolt in Iraq. This happened six months after a referendum (in practice, a round of consultation with tribal leaders) on the country’s future, and just after the announcement that Iraq would become a League of Nations “mandate” under British trusteeship rather than continue under colonial rule. Strikingly, neither consultation with Iraqis nor the promise of internationalization sufficed to avert an uprising.

In 1920, as in 2004, the insurrection had religious origins and leaders, but it soon transcended the country’s ancient ethnic and sectarian divisions. The first anti-British demonstrations were in the mosques of Baghdad, but the violence quickly spread to the Shiite holy city of Karbala, where British rule was denounced by Ayatollah Muhammad Taqi al-Shirazi, the historical counterpart of today’s Shiite firebrand, Moktada al-Sadr. At its height, the revolt stretched as far north as the Kurdish city of Kirkuk and as far south as Samawah. Then, as in 2004, much of the violence was more symbolic than strategically significant; British bodies were mutilated, much as American bodies were at Fal-lujah. But there was a real threat to the British position. The rebels systematically sought to disrupt the occupiers’ infrastructure, attacking railways and telegraph lines. In some places, British troops and civilians were cut off and besieged. By August 1920 the situation in Iraq was so desperate that the general in charge appealed to London not only for reinforcements but also for chemical weapons (mustard gas bombs or shells), though, contrary to historical legend, these turned out to be unavailable and so were never used.²²

This brings us to the second lesson the United States might have learned from the British experience. Reestablishing order is no easy task. In 1920 the British eventually ended the rebellion through a com-

ination of aerial bombardment and punitive village-burning expeditions. Even Winston Churchill, then the minister responsible for the Royal Air Force, was shocked by the actions of some trigger-happy pilots and vengeful ground troops. And despite their overwhelming technological superiority, British forces still suffered more than 2,000 dead and wounded. Moreover, the British had to keep troops in Iraq long after the country was granted "full sovereignty." Although Iraq was declared formally independent in 1932, British troops remained there until 1955.

Is history repeating itself? For all the talk there was in June 2004 of restoring "full sovereignty" to an interim Iraqi government, President Bush made it clear that he intended to "maintain our troop level...as long as necessary" and that U.S. troops would continue to operate "under American command." This in itself implied something significantly less than full sovereignty. If the new Iraqi government did not have control over a well-armed foreign army in its own territory, then it lacked one of the defining characteristics of a sovereign state: a monopoly over the legitimate use of violence. That was precisely the point made in April by Marc Grossman, Under-Secretary of State for Political Affairs, during Congressional hearings on the future of Iraq. In Grossman's words: "The arrangement would be, I think as we are doing today, that we would do our very best to consult with that interim government and take their views into account." But American commanders would still "have the right, and the power, and the obligation" to decide on the appropriate role for their troops.²³

There is, in principle, nothing inherently wrong with "limited sovereignty." In both West Germany and Japan sovereignty was limited for some years after 1945. Sovereignty is not an absolute but a relative concept. Indeed, it is a common characteristic of empires that they consist of multiple tiers of sovereignty. In what Charles Maier has called the "fractal geometry of empire," the superstructure of imperial power contains within it multiple scaled-down versions of itself, none fully sovereign. In other words, there are "micro" chains of command within each link of the "macro" chain of command. Again, however, there is a need for American policymakers and voters to understand the imperial business they are now in. For this business can have costly overheads.

The problem is that for indirect rule, or limited sovereignty, to be successful in Iraq, Americans must be willing to foot a substantial bill for the occupation and reconstruction of the country. Unfortunately, in the absence of a radical change in the direction of U.S. fiscal policy, their ability to do so is set to diminish, if not to disappear.

Since President Bush's election, total federal outlays have risen by an estimated \$530 billion, a 30% increase. This increase can be attributed only partly to the wars the administration has waged. Higher defense expenditures account for just 30% of the total increment, whereas increased spending on health care accounts for 17%, Social Security and income security for 16% apiece, and Medicare for 14%.²⁴ The reality is that the Bush administration has raised expenditure on welfare by rather more than spending on warfare. Meanwhile, even as expenditure has risen, there has been a steep reduction in the federal government's revenues, which have slumped from 21% of gross domestic product in 2000 to less than 16% in 2004.²⁵ The recession of 2001 played only a minor role in creating this shortfall of receipts. More important were the three successive tax cuts enacted by the administration with the support of the Republican-led Congress, beginning with the initial \$1.35 trillion tax cut over ten years and the \$38 billion tax rebate of the Economic Growth and Tax Reform Reconciliation Act in 2001, continuing with the Job Creation and Worker Assistance Act in 2002, and concluding with the reform of the double taxation of dividend income in 2003. With a combined value of \$188 billion—equivalent to around 2% of the 2003 national income—these tax cuts were significantly larger than those passed in Ronald Reagan's Economic Recovery Tax Act of 1981.²⁶ The effect of this combination of increased spending and reduced revenue has been a dramatic growth in the federal deficit. Bush inherited a surplus of around \$236 billion from the fiscal year 2000. At the time of writing, the projected deficit for 2004 was \$413 billion, representing a swing from the black into the red of nearly two-thirds of a trillion dollars.²⁷

Government spokesmen have sometimes defended this borrowing spree as a stimulus to economic activity. There are good reasons to be skeptical, however, not least because the principal beneficiaries of these tax cuts have been the very wealthy. (Vice-President Cheney belied the macroeconomic argument when he justified the third tax cut in the following candid terms: "We won the midterms. This is

our due."²⁸) Another Cheney aphorism that is bound to be quoted by future historians is his assertion that "Reagan proved deficits don't matter."²⁹ But Reagan did nothing of the kind. The need to raise taxes to bring the deficit back under control was one of the key factors in George H. W. Bush's defeat in 1992. In turn, the systematic reduction of the deficit under Bill Clinton was one of the reasons long-term interest rates declined and the economy boomed in the later 1990s. The only reason that, under Bush junior, deficits have not seemed to matter is the persistence of low interest rates over the past four years, which has allowed Bush, in common with many American households, to borrow more while paying less in debt service. Net interest payments on the federal debt amounted to just 1.4% of the GDP last year, whereas the figure was 2.3% in 2000 and 3.2% in 1995.³⁰

Yet this persistence of low long-term interest rates is not a result of ingenuity on the part of the U.S. Treasury. It is in part a consequence of the willingness of the Asian central banks to buy vast quantities of dollar-denominated securities, such as 10-year Treasury bonds, with the primary motivation of keeping their currencies pegged to the dollar, and with the secondary consequence of funding the Bush deficits.³¹ It is no coincidence that around half the publicly held federal debt is now in foreign hands, more than double the proportion ten years ago.³² Not since the days of Czarist Russia has a great empire relied so heavily on lending from abroad. The trouble is that these flows of foreign capital into the United States cannot be relied on indefinitely, especially if there is a likelihood of rising deficits in the future. That is why the Bush administration's failure to address the fundamental question of fiscal reform is so important. The reality is that the official figures for both the deficit and the accumulated federal debt understate the magnitude of the country's impending fiscal problems because they leave out of account the huge and unfunded liabilities of the Medicare and Social Security systems.³³ The United States derives a significant benefit from the status of the dollar as the world's principal reserve currency; it is one reason why foreign investors are prepared to hold such large volumes of dollar-denominated assets. But reserve-currency status is not divinely ordained. It could be undermined if international markets take fright at the magnitude of America's still latent fiscal crisis.³⁴ A decline in the dollar would certainly hurt foreign holders of U.S. currency more than it would hurt Americans. But a shift in international expectations about U.S. finances might also bring about a sharp increase in long-term interest rates, which would have imme-

diate and negative feedback effects on the federal deficit by pushing up the cost of debt service.³⁵ It would also hurt highly leveraged (or indebted) American households, especially the rising proportion of them with adjustable-rate mortgages.³⁶

Empires need not be a burden on the taxpayers of the metropolis; indeed, many empires have arisen precisely in order to shift tax burdens from the center to the periphery. Yet there is little sign that the United States will be able to achieve even a modest amount of “burden sharing” in the foreseeable future. During the Cold War, American allies contributed at least some money and considerable manpower to the maintenance of the West’s collective security. But those days are gone. At the Democratic Party convention in Boston last summer, John Kerry pledged to “bring our allies to our side and share the burden, reduce the cost to American taxpayers, and reduce the risk to American soldiers,” in order to “get the job done and bring our troops home.” “We don’t have to go it alone in the world,” he declared, “and we need to rebuild our alliances.”³⁷ Yet even if he had won in November, it is far from clear that Kerry would have been able to persuade the Europeans to commit significant resources to Iraq. In accepting his party’s nomination, the Massachusetts Senator recalled how, as a boy, he watched “British, French and American troops” working together in post-war Berlin. In those days, however, there was a much bigger incentive—symbolized by the Red Army units that surrounded West Berlin—for European states to support American foreign policy. It is not that the French and the Germans (or for that matter the British) were passionately pro-American during the Cold War. On the contrary, American experts constantly fretted about the levels of popular anti-Americanism in Europe, on both the Left and the Right. Nevertheless, as long as there was a Soviet Union to the East, there was one overwhelming argument for the unity of “the West.” That ceased to be the case fifteen years ago, when the reforms of Mikhail Gorbachev caused the Soviet empire to crumble. Ever since then, the incentives for transatlantic harmony have grown steadily weaker. Europeans do not regard the threat posed by Islamist terrorism as sufficiently serious to justify unconditional solidarity with the United States. On the contrary, since the Spanish general election in March 2004, they have acted as if the optimal response to the growing threat of Islamist terrorism is to distance themselves from the United States. An astonishingly large number of Europeans see the United States as itself a threat to international stability. In a recent Gallup poll, 61% of Europeans said

they thought the European Union plays “a positive role with regard to peace in the world,” while just 8% said its role was negative. No fewer than 50% of those polled took the view that the United States now plays a negative role.³⁸

So the United States is what it would rather not be: a Colossus to some, a Goliath to others—an empire that dare not speak its name.³⁹ Yet what is the alternative to American empire? If, as so many people seem to wish, the United States were to scale back its military commitments overseas, then what?

We tend to assume that power, like nature, abhors a vacuum. In the history of world politics, it seems that someone is always the hegemon or is bidding to play that role. Today, it is the United States; a century ago, it was the United Kingdom. Before that, it was France, Spain, and so on. The great 19th-century German historian Leopold von Ranke portrayed modern European history as an incessant struggle for mastery, in which a balance of power was possible only through recurrent conflict. More recent historians have inferred that as the superpowers of the Cold War era succumb to “overstretch,” their place may be taken by new powers. Once, the new powers were supposed to be Germany and Japan. These days, wary realists warn of the ascent of China and the European Union. Power, in other words, is not a natural monopoly; the struggle for mastery is both perennial and universal. The “unipolarity” identified by some commentators following the Soviet collapse cannot last much longer, for the simple reason that history hates a hyperpower. Sooner or later, challengers will emerge, and back we must go to a multipolar, multipower world. In other words, if the United States were to conclude from its experience in Iraq that the time had come to abandon its imperial pretensions, some other power or powers would soon seize the opportunity to bid for hegemony.

But what if no successor were to emerge? What if, instead of a balance of power, there was an absence of power? Such a situation is not unknown in history. Unfortunately, the world’s experience with power vacuums (or eras of “apolarity,” if you will) is hardly encouraging. Anyone who looks forward eagerly to an American retreat from hegemony should bear in mind that, rather than a multipolar world of competing great powers, a world with no hegemon may be the real alternative to U.S. primacy. Apolarity could turn out to mean not the

pacifist utopia envisaged in John Lennon's dirge *Imagine*, but an anarchic new Dark Age.

Why might a power vacuum arise early in the 21st century? The reasons are not hard to imagine. Consider the three principal contenders for the succession if the United States were to succumb to imperial decline. Impressive though the European Union's recent enlargement has been (not to mention the achievement of a twelve-country monetary union), the reality is that demographic trends almost certainly condemn Europe to decline. With fertility rates dropping and life expectancies rising, Western European societies are projected to have median ages in the upper 40s by the middle of this century. Indeed, "Old Europe" will soon be truly old. By 2050, one in every three Italians, Spaniards, and Greeks is expected to be 65 or older, even allowing for ongoing immigration.⁴⁰ Europeans therefore face an agonizing choice between Americanizing their economies (i.e., opening their borders to much more immigration, with all the cultural changes that would entail) or transforming their Union into a kind of fortified retirement community, in which a dwindling proportion of employees shoulder the rising cost of outmoded welfare systems. These problems are compounded by the Euro area's sluggish growth, a consequence of labor market rigidities, high marginal tax rates, and relatively low labor inputs (notably in terms of working hours).⁴¹ Meanwhile, the EU's still incomplete constitutional reforms mean that individual European nation-states continue to enjoy considerable autonomy outside the economic sphere, particularly in foreign and security policy.

Optimistic observers of China insist the economic miracle of the past decade will endure, with growth continuing at such a pace that within thirty or forty years China's gross domestic product will surpass that of the United States.⁴² Yet it is far from clear that the normal rules for emerging markets have been suspended for Beijing's benefit. First, a fundamental incompatibility exists between the free-market economy, based inevitably on private property and the rule of law, and the Communist monopoly on power, which breeds corruption and impedes the creation of transparent fiscal, monetary, and regulatory institutions. As is common in "Asian Tiger" economies, production is running far ahead of domestic consumption (thus making the economy heavily dependent on exports) and even further ahead of domestic financial development. Indeed, no one knows the full extent of the problems in the Chinese domestic banking sector.⁴³ Those Western banks that are buying up bad debts to establish themselves in China need remind-

ing that this strategy was tried once before, a century ago, in the era of the Open Door policy, when American and European firms rushed into China only to see their investments vanish amid the turmoil of war and revolution. Then, as now, hopes for China's development ran euphorically high, especially in the United States. But those hopes were dashed, and could be disappointed again. A Chinese currency or banking crisis could have immense ramifications, especially when Western investors confront the difficulty of repatriating assets held in China. When foreigners invest directly in factories rather than through intermediaries such as bond markets, there is no real need for capital controls. It is no easy thing to repatriate a steel mill.

With birthrates in Muslim societies more than double the European average, the Islamic countries of Northern Africa and the Middle East are bound to put some kind of pressure on Europe and the United States in the years ahead. If, for example, the population of Yemen could exceed that of Germany by 2050 (as the United Nations forecasts), there must either be a dramatic improvement in the Middle East's economic performance or substantial emigration from the Arab world to aging Europe. Yet the subtle Muslim colonization of Europe's cities—most striking in France, where North Africans populate whole suburbs of cities like Marseille and Paris—may not necessarily portend the advent of a new and menacing "Eurabia."⁴⁴ In fact, the Muslim world is as divided as ever, and not merely along the traditional fissure between Sunnis and Shiites. It is also split between those Muslims seeking a peaceful *modus vivendi* with the West (an impulse embodied in the Turkish government's desire to join the EU) and those drawn to the revolutionary Islamism of renegades like Osama bin Laden. Opinion polls from Morocco to Pakistan suggest high levels of anti-American sentiment, but not unanimity. In Europe, only a minority expresses overt sympathy for terrorist organizations. Most young Muslims in England still seem to prefer assimilation to *jihad*. We are still a long way from a bipolar clash of civilizations, much less the rise of a new caliphate that might pose a geopolitical threat to the United States and its allies.

In short, two of the obvious potential successors to the United States, the European Union and China, seem to contain within them the seeds of future decline; while Islam remains a diffuse force in world politics, lacking the resources of a superpower.

Let us now imagine that American neoconservative hubris meets its nemesis in Iraq and that the Bush administration's project to democratize the Middle East at gunpoint ends in ignominious withdrawal. Suppose also that no aspiring rival power steps in to fill the resulting vacuums—not only in Iraq but conceivably also in Afghanistan, the Balkans, and Haiti. What would an apolar future look like? The answer is not easy, as there have been very few periods in world history with no contenders for the role of global, or at least regional, hegemon. The nearest approximation in modern times might be the 1920s, when the United States walked away from President Woodrow Wilson's project of global democracy, and collective security centered on the League of Nations. There was certainly a power vacuum in Central and Eastern Europe after the collapse of the Romanov, Habsburg, Hohenzollern, and Ottoman empires, but it did not last long. The old West European empires were quick to snap up the choice leftovers of Ottoman rule in the Middle East. The Bolsheviks had reassembled the czarist empire by 1922. And by 1936 German *revanche* was already well advanced.

One must go back much further in history to find a period of true and enduring apolarity; as far back, in fact, as the 9th and 10th centuries. In this era, the two sundered halves of the Roman Empire—Rome and Byzantium—had long passed the height of their power. The leadership of the Western half was divided between the pope, who led Christendom, and the heirs of Charlemagne, who split up his short-lived empire under the Treaty of Verdun in 843. No credible claimant to the title of emperor emerged until Otto was crowned in 962, and even he was merely a German prince with pretensions (never realized) to rule Italy. Byzantium, meanwhile, was grappling with the Bulgar rebellion to the north, while the Abbasid caliphate, initially established by Abu al-Abbas in 750, was in steep decline by the middle of the 10th century. In China, too, imperial power was in a dip between the T'ang and Sung dynasties.

The weakness of the older empires allowed new and smaller entities to flourish. When the Khazar tribe converted to Judaism in 740, their khanate occupied a Eurasian power vacuum between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea. In Kiev, far from the reach of Byzantium, the regent Olga laid the foundation for the future Russian Empire in 957 when she embraced the Orthodox Church. The Seljuks, forebears of the Ottoman Turks, carved out the Sultanate of Rum as the Abba-

sid caliphate lost its grip over Asia Minor. Africa had its mini-empire in Ghana; Central America had its Mayan civilization. Connections between all these entities were minimal or nonexistent. This condition was the antithesis of globalization. The world was broken up into disconnected, introverted civilizations.

One distinctive feature of the era was that, in the absence of strong secular polities, religious questions often produced serious convulsions. Indeed, it was religious institutions that often set the political agenda. In the 8th and 9th centuries, Byzantium was racked by controversy over the proper role of icons in worship. By the 11th century, the Pope felt confident enough to humble Holy Roman Emperor Henry IV during the battle over which of them should have the right to appoint bishops. The new monastic orders amassed considerable power in Christendom, particularly the Cluniacs, the first order to centralize monastic authority. In the Muslim world, it was the *ulema* (clerics) who truly ruled. This ascendancy of the clergy helps to explain why the period ended with the extraordinary holy wars known as the Crusades, the first of which was launched by European Christians in 1095. Yet this apparent clash of civilizations was in many ways just another example of the apolar world's susceptibility to long-distance military raids directed at urban centers by more backward peoples. The Vikings repeatedly attacked West European towns in the 9th century, including Nantes in 842 and Seville in 844, to name just two. One Frankish chronicler bemoaned "the endless flood of Vikings" sweeping southward. Byzantium, too, was sacked in 860 by raiders from Rus, the kernel of the future Russia. This "fierce and savage tribe" showed "no mercy," lamented the Byzantine patriarch. It was like "the roaring sea...destroying everything, sparing nothing." Such were the conditions of an anarchic age. Small wonder that the future seemed to lie in creating small, defensible political units like the Venetian republic (the quintessential city-state, which was conducting its own foreign policy by 840) or Alfred the Great's England (arguably the first thing resembling a nation-state in European history, created in 886).

Could an apolar world today produce an era reminiscent of the age of Alfred? It could, though with some important and troubling differences. Certainly, one can imagine the world's established powers retreating into their own regional spheres of influence. But what of the growing pretensions to autonomy of the supranational bodies created under U.S. leadership after the Second World War? The United Nations, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the

World Trade Organization all consider themselves in some way representative of the “international community.” Surely their aspirations to global governance point to the true alternative to American empire: a new “Light Age” of collective security and international law, the very antithesis of the Dark Ages?⁴⁵ Yet universal claims were also an integral part of the rhetoric of that distant era. All the empires maintained that they ruled the world; some, unaware of the existence of other civilizations, may have even believed that they did. The reality, however, was not a global Christendom, nor an all-embracing Empire of Heaven, but political fragmentation. And that is also true today. The defining characteristic of our age is not a shift of power upward to supranational institutions, but downward.

With the end of the state’s monopoly on the means of violence and the collapse of its control over channels of communication, humanity has entered an era characterized as much by disintegration as integration. If free flows of information and of the means of production empower multinational corporations and nongovernmental organizations (as well as evangelistic religious cults of all denominations), the free flow of destructive technology empowers both criminal organizations and terrorist cells. These groups can operate, it seems, wherever they choose, from New York to Najaf, from Madrid to Moscow. By contrast, the writ of the international community is not global at all. It is, in fact, increasingly confined to a few strategic outposts such as Kabul and Pristina. In short, it is the non-state actors who truly wield global power—including both the monks and the Vikings of our time.

Waning empires, religious revivals, incipient anarchy, a retreat into fortified cities—these are the Dark Age experiences that a post-imperial world could find itself reliving. The symptoms are already not far to seek. The trouble is, of course, that this Dark Age would be altogether more dangerous than the Dark Age of the 9th and 10th centuries. The world is much more populous, roughly twenty times more. Technology has transformed production. Now human societies depend not merely on fresh water and the harvest but also on finite supplies of fossil fuels that pollute the earth’s atmosphere, altering its climate even as they are used. Technology has upgraded destruction, too. It is now possible not just to sack a city but to obliterate it. For all these reasons, the prospect of an apolar world should perturb us today a great deal more than it perturbed the heirs of Charlemagne. If the United States is to retreat from global hegemony—its fragile self-image dented by minor setbacks on the imperial frontier—its critics at home

and abroad must not pretend that they are ushering in a new era of multipolar harmony, or even a return to the good old balance of power. For the alternative to unipolarity may not be multipolarity at all. It could be apolarity, a global vacuum of power. And far more dangerous forces than rival great powers would benefit from such a not-so-new world disorder.

The best case for empire is always the case for order. Liberty is, of course, a loftier goal. But only those who have never known disorder fail to grasp that order is the necessary precondition for liberty. In that sense, the case for American empire is simultaneously a case against international anarchy. None of this is to pretend that the United States is a perfect empire. Empires are by their very nature compromised by the power that they wield; they inexorably engender their own dissolution at home even as they impose order abroad. That is why our expectations should not be pitched too high. If it is hard enough to be an empire when you believe you have a mandate from heaven, how much harder is it for the United States, which believes that heaven intended it to free the world, not rule it! Sadly, there are still a few places in the world that must be ruled before they can be freed. Sadly, the act of ruling them will sorely try Americans, who instinctively begrudge such places the blood, treasure, and time that they consume. Yet, saddest of all, there seems to be no better alternative for the United States and the world. Once, a hundred and sixty years ago, America's imperial destiny seemed manifest. It has since become obscure. But it is America's destiny just the same. ●

Notes

1. Ron Suskind, "Without a Doubt," *New York Times Magazine*, 17 October 2004.
2. Bob Woodward, *Plan of Attack* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004), p. 443.
3. It is symptomatic that John Lewis Gaddis interprets the present predicament of the United States with reference to John Quincy Adams. See John Lewis Gaddis, *Surprise, Security, and the American Experience* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004).
4. Timothy Garton Ash, *Free World: Why a Crisis of the West Reveals the Opportunity of Our Time* (London, 2004), p. 102.
5. Text of President Bush's Speech, *New York Times*, 13 April 2004.
6. David M. Halbfinger and David E. Sanger, "Bush and Kerry Clash over Iraq and a Timetable," *New York Times*, 7 September 2004.

7. On the significance of the frontier in imperial history, see Charles S. Maier, *Among Empires: American Ascendancy and Its Predecessors* (forthcoming).
8. Remarks by the President at the 20th Anniversary of the National Endowment for Democracy, November 6, 2003, online at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2003/11/20031106-2.html>.
9. President Bush's speech to the Republican Party Convention, *New York Times*, September 2, 2004.
10. See Francis Fukuyama, *State Building: Governance and World Order in the Twenty-First Century* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004).
11. Roger Cohen, "'Imperial America' Retreats from Iraq," *New York Times*, 4 July 2004.
12. Daniel Drezner, "Bestriding the World, Sort of," *Wall Street Journal*, 17 June 2004.
13. Michiko Kakutani, "Attention Deficit Disorder in a Most Peculiar Empire," *New York Times*, 21 May 2004.
14. See my *Empire: The Rise and Demise of the British World Order and the Lessons for Global Power* (New York: Basic Books, 2003).
15. This case has been made in a series of articles by Joseph Nye.
16. By the end of August 2004, there had been around 300 allegations of mistreatment of detainees; 155 had so far been investigated, of which 66 had been substantiated. *Wall Street Journal*, 26 August 2004.
17. Ibid.
18. Woodward, *Plan of Attack*, p. 249.
19. "The Best-Laid Plans?," *Financial Times*, 3 August 2003.
20. Woodward, *Plan of Attack*, pp. 150, 270.
21. See the remarks of U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan in an interview with the BBC in September 2004.
22. Daniel Barnard, "The Great Iraqi Revolt: The 1919–20 Insurrections against the British in Mesopotamia," paper presented at the Harvard Graduate Student Conference in International History, April 23, 2004, online at http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~conih/abstracts/Barnard_article.doc.
23. "White House Says Iraq Sovereignty Could Be Limited," *New York Times*, 22 April 2004.
24. My own calculations based on Budget of the United States Government, 2005 historical tables, online at <http://frwebgate.access.gpo.gov/cgi-bin/multidb.cgi>.
25. Budget of the United States Government, 2005, table 1.3, online at <http://www.gpoaccess.gov/usbudget/fy05/sheets/hist01z2.xls>.
26. "Kennedy, Reagan, and Bush Tax Cuts in Historical Perspective," online at <http://www.taxfoundation.org/bushtaxplan-size.htm>.
27. *Economic Report of the President*, table B-81, online at <http://wais.access.gpo.gov>.
28. Ron Suskind, *The Price of Loyalty: George W. Bush, the White House, and the Education of Paul O'Neill* (New York, 2004), p. 291.
29. Ibid.
30. Figures taken from the Congressional Budget Office website.

31. See Michael P. Dooley, David Folkerts-Landau, and Peter Garber, "An Essay on the Revived Bretton Woods System," NBER Working Paper 9971 (September 2003) and "The Revived Bretton Woods System: The Effects of Periphery Intervention and Reserve Management on Interest Rates and Exchange Rates in Center Countries," NBER Working Paper 10332 (March 2004).
32. Source: Treasury Bulletin, June 2004, online at <http://www.fms.treas.gov/bulletin/>. Cf P. Munter, "Most Treasuries in Foreign Hands," *Financial Times*, 14 June 2004.
33. See most recently, Peter G. Peterson, *Running on Empty: How the Democratic and Republican Parties are Bankrupting Our Future and What Americans Can Do about It* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2004). According to the April 2004 report of the Medicare trustees, the system's obligations to future retirees are underfunded to the tune of \$62 trillion. See Joe Liebermann, "America Needs Honest Fiscal Accounting," *Financial Times*, 25 May 2004.
34. Niall Ferguson, "A Dollar Crash? Euro Trashing," *New Republic*, 21 June 2004.
35. See Paul Krugman, "Questions of Interest," *New York Times*, 20 April 2004. For a different view, see David Malpass, "Don't Blame the Deficits for America's Rate Hikes," *Financial Times*, 3 May 2004.
36. Niall Ferguson, "Who's Buried by Higher Rates," *Fortune*, 14 June 2004. On the macroeconomic implications of the decline of the American savings rate, see Lawrence H. Summers, "The United States and the Global Adjustment Process," Third Annual Stavros S. Niarchos Lecture, Institute for International Economics, Washington D.C., March 23, 2004.
37. "Kerry's Acceptance: There is a Right Way and a Wrong Way to be Strong," *New York Times*, 30 July 2004.
38. Robert Manchin and Gergely Hideg, "E.U. Survey: Are Transatlantic Ties Loosening?," online at <http://www.gallup.com/content/default.aspx?ci=12247&pg=1>.
39. The phrase was originated by Charles Maier.
40. Population Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations Secretariat, *World Population Prospects: The 2002 Revision*, online at <http://esa.un.org/unpp>.
41. Edward C. Prescott, "Why do Americans Work so Much More than Europeans?," NBER Working Paper 10316 (February 2004). For a different interpretation, see Olivier Blanchard, "The Economic Future of Europe," NBER Working Paper 10310 (February 2004).
42. Dominic Wilson and Roopa Purushothaman, "Dreaming with the BRICs: The Path to 2050," Goldman Sachs Global Economics Paper 99 (October 1, 2003).
43. Nikola Spatafora, Yongzheng Yang, and Tarhan Feyzioglu, "China's Emergence and its Impact on the Global Economy," *International Monetary Fund World Economic Outlook* (March 2004): 82–99.
44. Niall Ferguson, "Eurabia?," *New York Times Magazine*, 4 April 2004. The neologism was coined by the Egyptian-born writer Bat Ye'or.
45. For an optimistic view, see David Held, *Global Covenant: The Social Democratic Alternative to the Washington Consensus* (Cambridge/Malden, Mass.: Polity Press, 2004). Rather more pessimistic and more aware of medieval visions of a global "civil society" is Ian Linden, *A New Map of the World* (London: Darton Longman and Todd, Ltd., 2003).