

Incoherent Empire: A Critique of the American Empire in terms of The Sources of Social Power

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Author of Incoherent Empire. London & New York: Verso/ Norton, 2003.

German edition, Das ohnmachtige Supermacht (Frankfurt, 2003) won the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung Prize for the best book on politics published in 2003.

Japanese Edition published by NTT Press, Tokyo, Dec 6, 2004

November 2004

American foreign policy has been recently dominated by the venture into Iraq. This has not gone well. Most criticism has focused on “mistakes” – there were not enough US troops, or they were of the wrong type, the Iraqi army was disbanded after it surrendered, looting was not anticipated, the US believed Iraqi exile claims etc. But I will argue here that the mistakes were only the surface of a more profound American failure. The Iraq venture was doomed by an attempt to create what some neo-conservatives styled a “New American Empire”. This exaggerated American powers, made facile historical comparisons with previous Empires, mis-identified the enemy, and mis-identified the century we live in.

I wrote almost all of my book *Incoherent Empire* before the war in Iraq began. For two decades I have been a historical sociologist, predicting the past. But in this book I engaged in real prediction. I said that this foreign policy was doomed to disastrous failure. My book was astonishingly accurate in almost its predictions.

From my previous research in *The Sources of Social Power*, I derived two relevant conclusions. First, was the very general statement that to exercise general power requires combining some degree of ideological, economic, military and political power. Most regimes wield unequal combinations of them, and some regimes may be quite light on one or two. But the US tried to rely overwhelmingly on military power alone – and indeed on only one part of military power, offensive fire-power. This is insufficient to create empire. Second, in the realm of political and ideological power, the world moved in the late 20th century from an Age of Empires to an Age of Nation-States.

Ye the neo-conservatives of the Bush administration disagreed. They broke with the traditional American aversion to the word “empire”, and proclaimed the coming of a New American Empire. “The fact is”, said Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Charles Krauthammer, “no country has been as dominant culturally, economically, technologically and militarily in the history of the world since the late Roman Empire”. Vice-President Cheney and his wife sent out a Christmas card in 2003 containing this quote from Benjamin Franklin: “And if a sparrow cannot fall to the ground without His notice, is it probable that an Empire can rise without His aid?” The Bush Administration, plus many Republican Congressmen and Senators, declared that the US had the power to remake Afghanistan and Iraq, restructure the Middle East, and eliminate terrorism and weapons of mass destruction across the world.

Their goals were quite limited. They did not want a permanent rule over foreign lands. The US has been generally content with an indirect and informal Empire, able to pressure and threaten, but only in the last resort to invade, supporting local allies who could then rule the country. This time, however, the US would invade without significant local allies, effect regime change, and then two to five years later would leave with a more friendly client state in place. This was a **temporary territorial imperialism**, and it would be confined to a few places. Only two regions were in its sights, the central core of the Muslim world, in the Middle East plus western Asia,

and north-east Asia. The focus was on what the neo-cons. called the “Axis of Evil”, the “rogue states” of North Korea, Iraq and Iran, though with Syria sometimes also informally added. If threats against these “rogues” failed, the US would subject them to temporary territorial imperialism. Later, more rogues could be added to our firing-sights.¹

The new imperialists pointed to the historical examples of 1945 when the US occupied Japan and Germany. They did not observe how unusually favorable were the conditions then. The locals were desperate for peace, after at least six years of war. Their cities were in ashes, and survival was their main desire. Almost no one wished to restart the war. No American soldiers were killed by hostile fire after surrender. Japan and Germany also had recent experience of parliamentary institutions. Afghanistan and Iraq were different in every way from these cases, but the neo-cons. seemed not to notice.

I now enumerate the power resources of the United States, asking whether they were sufficient for this new form of “temporary territorial imperialism”.

Economic Power

Though the US dominates the world economy much less than in the first decades after 1945, it remains the main engine of global growth, the dollar remains the world’s reserve currency and Wall Street trades two-thirds of the value of the world’s stocks and shares. The US is the biggest debtor nation because foreigners invest in the US economy. If China and Japan removed their surpluses from the US and invested them elsewhere, American financial dominance would be ended. But the Asian economies are too inter-dependent with the US for them to risk doing that. The US still has the wealth to finance foreign interventions. Economic power is not lacking. Yet the Bush administration is seeking this temporary empire while actually cutting taxes, and American voters would not support the higher taxes the policy would really need. The Aghan and Iraqi interventions are grossly under-financed. But this is a problem of ideological, not economic power. Americans could pay for an empire, but they do not want to.

Military Power

Military resources dominated the minds of the neo-conservatives, for American military power has no rival. Japan and Europe do not pursue military power, the Soviet Union collapsed, and Russia and China want peace and entry into world markets. Almost all the world’s military budgets are declining, except the American. Its military budget for 2004 is a staggering 45% of the world’s total military spending, exceeding the spending of the next 28 states combined. The

¹ The program is still being vigorously advocated by ex-administration officials David Frum and Richard Perle, in their book *An End to Evil. How To Win the War on Terror*. New York: Random House, 2003. They have added Saudi Arabia as a “rogue target”.

gap is growing wider. The US is the world's only military giant. Its enormous nuclear arsenal is not relevant here. Nuclear weapons cannot be used to acquire empire, unless we want a radio-active one. But the US has global reach and massive fire-power. The US has military facilities in 132 countries, about half of them genuine bases. Few of these bases project power into the host country. These are not traditional imperial garrisons, controlling the local client ruler. In fact, movement in and out of them usually requires the permission of the host government. Rather, the bases project American fire-power elsewhere, globally.

The US has a monopoly of weapons that emerged during the 1990s in the so-called "revolution in military affairs", the RMA. This term, coined in the Pentagon by Andrew Marshall, refers to "a major change in the nature of warfare brought about by the innovative application of new technologies which, combined with dramatic changes in military doctrine and operational and organizational concepts, fundamentally alters the character and conduct of military operations".² It combines long-range precision radar-guided missiles and bombs, with "information warfare" deploying satellites in space, airborne cameras, handheld global positioning systems, and robot sensors. RMA-equipped forces can inflict enormous damage on the enemy, with very low US casualties. Even the US infantryman's M-16/ M4 rifle can now deliver 90 rounds a minute, disintegrating human beings 2,000 feet away – even without the attachable grenade-launcher.

The Afghan war of 2001-2002 and the Iraq invasion of 2003 showed the offensive utility of the system. In both cases enemy forces were devastated before their own weapons could come within range of Americans. The new imperialists refer to the RMA and the new weaponry as their greatest resource – apart from ritual incantations about democracy.

No comparable military dominance had ever previously existed. The US has a massive intimidatory presence to any state which might dare to stand up to it. Military defiance would be a very high-risk strategy for all but a handful of states. Even China and Russia (which have considerable deterrence of their own) would not choose to fight against the US. The lack of rivals is unique in the history of the world, as the neo-cons. say. The US dwarfs Britain's 19th century military leadership. True, its Royal Navy was deliberately kept bigger than the next two largest navies combined, and in reality it sometimes exceeded the next four. This meant that Britain was also defensively invulnerable (since it comprised islands and there were no airplanes). It also possessed unrivaled striking power across the seas and along the coast-lines of the world. But British army strength only ranked fifth in the world, behind Germany, France, Russia and Austria-Hungary. So Britain could not coerce its own continent, and faced rivals

² Marshall, "Some Thoughts on Military Revolutions", Memorandum for the Record, OSD Office of Net Assessment, July 27, 1993. He hoped that the precision of "smart" bombs would also bring low civilian casualties, claiming that "only the bad guys get hurt". Actually about 10,000 civilians have died in Afghanistan, about 15,000 in Iraq. This is a lot of corpses, though low by most historical conquest comparisons.

spread right across the Northern hemisphere. All previous Empires, including imperial Rome and China, had powerful neighbours whose military powers restrained their actions.

Yet though offensive fire-power can achieve battlefield victory, it cannot deliver imperial pacification. In battle, forces are concentrated, so fire-power is what matters. But in pacification, force dispersion occurs, and this requires more soldiers and policing with lesser weapons. The British Empire in the 19th century generally calculated that at least 250% more troops were needed for pacification than for initial conquest.

The US has 1.45 million men and women under arms, down from 2.2 million in the 1980s. This is less than China's 2.5 million, just greater than the million-plus of India, North Korea and Russia. The US only has 5% of the world's soldiers, but even that figure of 1.45 million is misleading. Over half are in the navy and airforce. The army total is about 540,000 and only half of them are "active". Only about 174,000 troops can be logistically deployed abroad at any one time. This is fewer combat troops than either the British or Roman Empires possessed at their height. US fighting forces are now fully-engaged across the world, with 135,000 troops in Iraq, 8,000 in Afghanistan, 36,000 (soon to be reduced to 24,000) in South Korea, and the rest scattered around the many global bases. For Iraq the US has been forced to call up most of its part-time reservist soldiers and to arbitrarily extend their tours of duty. Remember that only half the total in Iraq are actual fighting troops – about 68,000. If we divide them into three shifts, then only around 23,000 can be out on active duty at any one time. There are 39,000 cops in New York City alone. The US cannot police Iraq adequately.

Indeed, a second "revolution in military affairs" has turned the tide of military technology against imperialism. Guerilla fighters are now much better-equipped, especially in urban warfare. The Kalashnikov assault rifle, the shoulder-held anti-tank missile, Semtech, cellphone-activated bombs etc. are freely available globally, ideal weapons to take out small numbers of Great Power troops and helicopters, as we see in Chechnya, Afghanistan and Iraq. The deadliest weapon is the suicide bomber, nurtured in recent guerilla national liberation struggles, first in Sri Lanka, then in the Middle East. The US may be a military giant, but it is vulnerable to little rats scuttling around its feet.

Empire, however temporary, requires mopping-up operations, the quelling of rebellions and riots, and a gradual transition from military to policing roles. Yet this is becoming a more challenging a task, and the US lacks the soldiers to do it alone. It needs allies. I turn to political power.

Political Power

The US has been tempted by unilateralism, a policy of no allies (apart from Tony Blair). By "multilateralism" most people mean the UN or other great Powers. Though the international order is premised formally on the sovereign equality of states, some are more equal than others. The UN Security Council still embodies the inequalities of the late 1940s, allowing five

permanent members (the US, the USSR/ Russia, China, Britain and France) veto powers. But in reality two Superpowers, and then only one, dominated the Council. During the 1990s the US dominated UN resolutions, sanctions and military interventions. It used its veto more than all the other Security Council Powers combined. If the US opposed force, there was no force; and until 2003 whenever the US wanted force, it secured it.³

American power explains why Iraq was never offered incentives, as well as threats, to disarm.⁴ The US sometimes had to pursue laborious arm-twisting and bribing, but it almost always worked. From the Soviet collapse until late 2002 no powers got together to thwart the American will. The thought did not often occur to them, since American power was fairly hegemonic – routinized and mostly legitimate. It could rely on support from Britain and (usually) France on the Security Council, plus the rest of Western Europe and the other Anglo-Saxon countries, and Japan and other East Asian allies, plus most of Latin America. The US and not the UN had offered security to most of the world. The other states of the North had been under American protection since 1945, unable to defend themselves without American help. America dominated security organizations like NATO and SEATO. Whatever their jealousies and resentments, states in the “free world” believed they had common interests with the US. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, NATO was expanded eastward and former communist countries scabbled for American favours.

If this is called “multilateralism”, why should the US want unilateralism? US intervention without the political mandate of the United Nations incurs costs in military, economic and ideological power. The UN mandate brings unconditional permissions to use foreign bases, allied troops, the cash to fund the venture, and above all legitimacy. Europe, not the US, paid most of the costs of rebuilding Yugoslavia; Germany, Japan and the Arab oil states paid for most of the 1991 Gulf War. UN legitimacy particularly allows states to support actions which are unpopular with their own people. They hide behind UN authority and say “We are reluctant, but it is the will of the world”. Intervention goes better for the US when formally multilateral.

But in 2003 multilateralism collapsed. The US was unable to assemble a UN Security Council vote to back an invasion of Iraq. So it went ahead almost unilaterally. The UN, Europe, Russia, China and Japan now remained irrelevant to the invasion and even to the first stages of the subsequent unravelling of the pacification process, up to the end of 2003. These supposed “rivals” were powerless to stop the invasion and were forced to sit on the side-lines, ignored. In the short period that the US thought the war was going well, menacing threats were made against Syria and Iran, though a sudden silence had descended on US policy toward the North Korea.

³ This is what Michael Ignatieff called “empire lite”, in his *Empire Lite: Nation Building in Bosnia, Kosovo, Afghanistan*.

⁴ Phyllis Bennis, *Calling the Shots. How Washington Dominates Today's UN*. New York: Interlink Publishing, 1996.

But the neo-cons. still believed that the US could remake the world. The policy did not fail on abandonment of so-called multi-lateralism..

The really damaging part of unilateralism concerned Iraqis. The US had no significant Iraqi allies, apart from the Kurds in the north of the country. This was the vital factor preventing pacification of Iraq. Previous empires had rarely provided many of their own troops for pacification. They relied on local political allies. The European Empires (and the Romans and Chinese before them) initially ruled indirectly, through local native allies. Their conquests were aided by local princes and potentates feeling oppressed by the local ruler, desiring to share in the imperial spoils. The imperial troops focused their superior fire-power on the capital and major cities, while larger native forces fanned out over the territories to repress any resistance.

After pacification the imperialists might continue ruling indirectly, through client native princes. But if the colony was valuable, they gradually increased control over the local allies, and soon integrated them as soldiers and administrators into their own colonial regimes. In the British Raj in India British troops provided only between 50,000 and 78,000 out of a force total of between 250,000 and 290,000, about a fifth. 90% of the police force was Indian. In African colonies natives usually comprised well over 90% of the soldiers and police forces. Over 130,000 Indian troops fought for Britain in Europe in World War I and over 150,000 African troops fought for Britain in Asia in World War II. It seems extraordinary today – what concern were these wars of theirs?

Imperial civilian administration also usually worked through strengthening the authority of loyal princes, chiefs and tribal and village councils, and ruling through them. 1,000 British members of the Indian Civil Service were able to administer 250 million natives; 1,200 British civil servants administered a dozen African territories with a combined population of 43 million. Native allies were always better pacifiers, policemen, judges and civil servants because they had local knowledge and control networks on the ground. This is how Empires ruled in the Age of Empires. By the early 20th century their ranks included American imperialists in the Phillipines.

As these empires collapsed, the Cold War began. But the US kept up a comparable policy in its ensuing fifty-year “informal Empire”, dominating countries without the need of formal territorial controls. Because the Cold War was believed to be between rival economic and political ideologies, the US found “native allies” among the upper classes who favored capitalism over socialism. Given a little aid, these people usually proved more powerful than their leftist opponents. Only in a few cases, like Cuba and Vietnam, was the US confronted by leftist regimes successfully mobilizing most of the nation against it. Elsewhere, local clients ruled their own states, given a bit of US assistance now and then. But the Age of the Cold War is also over.

In Afghanistan, an almost-valueless country, the neo-cons. did maintain imperial tradition, relying heavily on local allies. Only about 300 Americans were on the ground as the Northern Alliance forces neared the Afghan capital Kabul. About 150 were US Special Forces “spotters”

giving co-ordinates to US bombers, and 150 were CIA agents with suitcases brimming with dollars to buy the support of Afghan warlords. After the conquest, US forces were strengthened to about 8,000 Americans plus several thousand other foreign allies. But the country outside of Kabul is mainly run by local warlords. This is a typical case of indirect rule over a low-value colony.

But in Iraq US ambition was much greater: to achieve “regime change” over the entire country. The American Plan A was that Iraqi generals would desert, overthrow Saddam and form a new friendly regime either before the invasion actually started or as it proceeded. Plan B (if we can dignify it with that term) was that US troops would be regarded as liberators and the various Iraqi factions would assemble together and form a new, viable government in a peaceful environment. I more sceptical over whether the neo-cons. thought this would actually be a democratic regime, but maybe it would eventually become one. These expectations were absurdly naive, a product of the Pentagon and the neo-cons. triumphing over the State Department -- which knew better. The US attitude to democracy resembled its earlier attitude to capitalism in the former Soviet Union – destroy the old regime and then democracy or markets will flourish naturally. Sociologists (and the Chinese government) know that democracy and markets actually require a strong institutional base nurtured over many years. They cannot be suddenly created by fiat or force.

So the real “unilateral” blunder of the US was not to ignore the UN but to invade a country without local allies on the ground. The exception was in the north, where Kurdish allies already ran a de facto government and so could broaden it amid a reasonable level of security. The exiled Iraqis on whom the US relied for the rest of Iraq had no effective organizations on the ground. This was especially true of the Sunni exiles, almost all of whom had spent 20 or 30 years in exile in the West. They are friends of the US but they are isolated in their own country. Some of the Shi’a had been exiled in neighbouring Iran and they had better local ties. Shi’a clerics could mobilize large numbers of locals. But the Shi’a leaders are not so friendly to the US. The principal Shi’a leader, Grand Ayatollah Sistani, still refuses to speak to any American official!

Iraq would have to be an historic “first” – a country pacified with no local allies. It could not be done. The Provisional Authority, the Iraqi National Council and now the supposedly “independent” Iraqi government have had little legitimacy among Iraqis. They have all had inadequate infrastructures for transitioning through pacification to policing to a stable government. This was not a “mistake” of inadequate preparation, for there were no local allies available. Powerful Iraqis did not look to Americans to deliver them from Saddam Hussein.

The US declared “mission accomplished” on May 1, 2003, at which point there had been 139 US military casualties. In mid-November, 2004, the US dead was reaching 1200, with anywhere between 8,000 and 15,000 wounded too severely to be able to return to Iraq. They continue at the rate of about two a day even without major skirmishes as at Fallujah. Far more Iraqis are dead or wounded, of course. A recent Johns Hopkins University medical survey of a cluster sample of Iraqi households projected that over the whole of Iraq over 100,000 Iraqis must have been killed

by American action since the invasion.⁵ The UN and international aid agencies have fled the country. Only Britain has committed significant resources into Iraq, though there are numerous token units provided by other allies. At the beginning of 2004 US forces began a tactical retreat, withdrawing from dangerous areas into fewer, larger bases. This left the under-trained, under-armed Iraqi police force to take the brunt of the insurgent attacks. Their losses rocketed. The timetables for reconstruction, oil pumping and elections have been delayed by the lack of order.

The US hopes desperately that somehow the various factions within the Kurdish, Sunni and Shia communities can be brought into some minimal level of compromise, and that stability can be achieved in a few years. The quagmire in Sunni areas is military, but the quagmire in Shi'a dominated areas is more political. Unlike the Sunnis, Shi'a leaders are ambivalent. They vocally oppose the US occupation, yet they need it to establish their dominance over Iraq. The radical cleric Moqtada Al Sadr challenged the more mainstream leaders, denouncing their hypocrisy and launching an attack on US forces (after they had tried to close down his newspapers). But his challenge has been beaten back, at least for the moment. His untrained rag-tag army of young Shi'a men was severely mauled by US forces, and Ayatollah Ali Al Sistani, the preeminent Shi'a cleric, undercut his legitimacy. For the Shi'a have much to gain from US-organized elections. They are the majority group in Iraq. Though Sistani still refuses resolutely to directly meet with any American, he favors the elections planned for late January, 2005. He believes a majority will vote for Shi'a candidates who favor religious laws for the country and a unitary constitution allowing Shi'a domination. His assessment is probably correct.

I make a further prediction: if the election is held, Allawi and his allies in the US-appointed administration will be routed by Sistani's men – with the possibility that the second largest Shi'a bloc will be formed by even more anti-American leaders headed by Al Sadr and Achmed Chalabi (formerly a US ally, now its enemy). It is hard to see the Shi'a leaders governing Iraq in a way congenial to US interests as defined by the Bush administration. And yet Bush desperately needs them, since he cannot produce any viable Sunni leaders who are not pro-insurgent. It remains unclear whether substantial Sunni groups will participate in the election. If the Muslim Scholars Association did, it would probably win a majority among the Sunnis. But it is not merely opposed to the US presence. Many of its leaders are (non-fighting) parts of the insurgency. This is also a political and ideological quagmire for the US. It can hold highly imperfect elections, which will bring a Shi'a Islamist majority government. It might be able to compromise with the Kurds. If not they would declare autonomy, if not independence. Neither will be able to cooperate with the Sunnis if the US remains, for the main Sunni organizations will be still fighting them. If the US withdraws, there might be a civil war – but then there already is a civil war there caused by the American presence. I see no way out other than withdrawal at some stage, essentially defeated, as in Vietnam, but this time defeated not by a powerful army but a rag-tag bunch of patriots. Of course, no-one can accurately predict what will happen, given

⁵ Les Roberts et. Al., "Mortality before and after the 2003 invasion of Iraq: cluster sample survey", *The Lancet*, on-line version at www.thelancet.com October 29, 2004.

lack of knowledge of rebel numbers and character. The apparent dearth of US intelligence is not reassuring; while the situation is much worse than the neo-cons. had expected.

Japan seems to have been entering the American coalition just as its failure became very clear. Other countries are leaving – Bulgaria and Poland have recently announced withdrawal soon. Of course, the main reason for the arrival of Japanese soldiers is the government’s desire to become a “normal” state with “normal” military commitments. Yet the Japanese people should reflect on whether the best way to become normal is to join a losing venture launched by an incoherent empire led by a president who (according to family members) believes this is a Christian crusade. Invasions of Iran or Syria would encounter similar problems. “Reformists” in Iraq and anti-Alawite factions in Syria are unlikely to seek Pentagon aid in their domestic squabbles, since this would weaken their domestic support. North Korea differs, since there is a major local ally, South Korea, though since its capital lies within artillery range of Northern forces, it would be a reluctant ally in any attack. Though the Chinese government might privately regard North Korea as a very difficult ally, it would surely also try to deter the US from acting aggressively. Again, the locals would not support the US.

Some would-be nation-states are disorderly, some fail altogether. But the US cannot do much to change them. Even its own client states are unreliable, pursuing their own goals, often to the detriment of American policy goals – as has been the case for Israel, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. They are sovereign states, pursuing their own policies. In interventions inside nation-states, the US is a political pygmy. After showering clients with aid, it cannot control them, and it lacks the option of increasing controls on them with military measures, as previous Empires did. After inflicting military devastation on rogues, it cannot bring political order – as both Afghanistan and Iraq reveal. The Age of Empire has gone. The US lacks the political power for empire.

Ideological Power

Underlying this is a sea-change in global ideologies. The Europeans (like almost all imperialists before them) were helped by one important absence – nationalism. Conquered populations rarely shared a sense of a common collective identity. The Europeans called them “Indians” and “Africans”, but they themselves did not, since their communities of attachment were much more local – regional, or tribal or sectarian. If they collaborated with the imperialists, they were not called traitors to the nation. Rather they were seen as advancing the interests of their local communities by sharing in the spoils of Empire. So, from Cortes securing the alliance of local city-states against the Aztecs, to the British and French mobilizing rival networks of Indian princes, to the Belgians ruling through Tutsi chieftains in Rwanda, there was no great ideological obstacle to Empire.

The neo-cons. say that American power is much greater than that of Britain or France in the 19th century. They are right if we compare individual countries. The US is more powerful than Britain was, much more powerful than France was. But Britain and France were not solitary imperialists. They were partners in a much broader imperialism launched first by Europe, then by

the West, on the rest of the world. The US joined in at the end of the 19th century in Cuba, the Philippines, China and elsewhere. This Western imperialism was much more formidable than the US is today, militarily, politically, economically, and especially ideologically. From the point of view of the rest of the world, Britain, France, Belgium, Russia, the United States etc. all looked culturally the same. When viewed collectively, there was simply no escaping their power. Ideologically, the West represented modernity and power. Native elites all over the world wanted Western education, science, technology and forms of state, even while they fought for liberation.

The West also controlled the weapons of mass communication. In Africa the British, the French, the Belgians, the Portuguese, the Germans, the Italians all communicated easily with each other; while “Africans” could not easily communicate with each other, since they spoke many languages and few were literate. A Western communications monopoly prevented collective resistance at other than a local level. Even news of Western atrocities did not easily leak out.

But by the 20th century Western political ideals had spread to the colonies. Educating the natives for civil or military administration meant exposing them to literacy and to liberal, socialist and fascist notions of popular sovereignty. When Indian nationalists effectively adapted such theories to local conditions, British rule in India was finished. That was the end of the Age of Empires.

Nationalism is now the world’s dominant ideology. Some theories of globalization assert that the nation-state dominated in the past, while transnational forces dominate today. True, before 1945 nation-states dominated Europe, but it was their Empires which dominated the world. Empires were replaced by nation-states between 1945 and the mid-1990s. Recent globalization has globalized the nation-state. All 191 of the world’s states now claim sovereignty over their territories “in the name of the people” – that is, they claim to be nation-states. They sit together in a body called “the United Nations”. True, Europe has moved slightly beyond the nation-state, while some states do not have effective sovereignty over their territories. But they all aspire to sovereignty. No widespread ideology legitimizes anyone else ruling over them. Since only “the people” should rule, anti-imperialism is rampant across the world.

Complications arise where more than one collective identity compete as sources of nationalism and anti-imperialism. In the Middle East there are four: nationalism attached to a state (for example, Egyptian or Iraqi nationalism), pan-Arab nationalism, Islamism (popularly called fundamentalism), and Muslim sectarianism (mainly Sunni and Shia). The last two are not strictly nationalism, though they also provide powerful anti-imperialisms. So Iraq is only a fragile, divided nation-state. There is distrust between Shi’a and Sunni, between secularists, conservatives and Islamists, and between and within tribes and cities. But Iraqis distrust the alien occupiers even more. Iraq is for the Iraqis, they say, and so do Arabs and Muslims in general, for this is the dogma of nationalism everywhere.

To suppress resistance, the US must intensify militarism, as did previous Empires. Europeans – and Japanese in China – slaughtered civilians and burned villages and crops. Thankfully, real empires have departed from the world. Though the US has committed some atrocities in Iraq, it

cannot go rampaging through the “Sunni Triangle” as the British Empire did when faced with comparable opposition. Villages were razed, crops burned, and men, women and children deliberately killed to “set an example” to others. Americans caused the deaths of an estimated 250,000 Filipinos in their last true imperial venture in the early 20th century, without causing much of an outcry. Global ideologies have changed since then to embrace ideals of racial equality and universal human rights. America claims to bring stability, freedom and democracy to Iraq, not repression. It must live up to this claim, not least in the eyes of the American public. Its imperial predecessors promised only “civilization”, order imposed on people who were termed “savages”, “barbarians”, “heathens” or “lower races”. America must do better today, but with fewer resources. We do have military power, and so we are continually tempted into using it.

American forces are locked into a deadly cycle. An insurgent attack kills a few soldiers or Iraqi collaborators. We counter-attack, using our main power source, which is devastating fire-power. We have twice poured fire-power into Fallujah in April and November 2004, killing several hundred civilians, including women, children and the elderly. The second time we successfully “took” the city. But most of the insurgents simply moved elsewhere and stepped up attacks in other cities. Even to assemble 10,000 troops, plus logistical support, for an assault on Fallujah in November, 2004, the US had to denude other areas. Samarra, had been supposedly “liberated” by US troops in early October. At the end of the month it exploded again into violence. So did Mosul.

The town of Ramadi is only 30 miles to the east of Fallujah. Most cities are too dangerous for US bases to be located in them. But Ramadi has two. Unfortunately, protecting them and the bomb-infested four-and-a-half-mile stretch of road between them drains most of the local marines’ resources. They say they cannot even seal off the main links to Fallujah, the highway or the desert smuggling routes, let alone perform any reconstruction. Staff Sergeant James Keefer, a civil affairs officers attached to the marines, told a reporter: “We used to go to civilian areas in one or two Humvees to look at hospitals and other places. Now it’s too dangerous, and we need four Humvees for a convoy, and we don’t have the resources. “ Nor can they protect the local Iraqi administrators, who are being decimated by the insurgents. Even the man who cleaned the portable toilets at one of the bases was killed by them. The result, said one of the region’s major tribal leaders, is that “The city is chaotic. There’s no presence of the Allawi government”.⁶

We also take militarism into our prisons. CIA interrogation manuals endorse the kinds of abuses revealed in the terrible photographs which came from Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq. The US declared that the Geneva Conventions could not apply in the war against terrorism, since the enemy was “evil”. Bush himself called the Guantanamo prisoners “killers”. Cheney called them “bad people”, Ashcroft said they were “uniquely dangerous”, Rumsfeld called them “the hardest of the hard”, “the worst of the worst”, “the most dangerous, best-trained, vicious killers on the

⁶ Edward Wong, “Provincial capital near Falluja is rapidly slipping into chaos”, *New York Times*, October 28, 2004.

face of the earth.” Iraqis are labelled “evil-doers”, “dead-enders”, “terrorists”. The enemy is dehumanized. Is it surprising that some American personnel torture prisoners? They have been told from the top what kind of war this is.

But such militarism is counter-productive, since everything we do is broadcast across the Middle East by the new “weapons of mass communication”. Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya now reach over 35 million Arabs. From Fallujah in November were transmitted images of dead Iraqis, a devastated city, marines strutting around a beautiful but shattered mosque with their boots and weapons on. The locals are appalled by what they see, and the battle for hearts and minds is lost. The insurgents receive more help, Shi’a and Sunni even begin sometimes to combine, and resistance escalates. The mass media also communicate values like nationalism, anti-imperialism, racial equality and human rights across the South of the world. Literacy and the media are global. Once things started going wrong in Iraq, the Bush administration could not even control its own media there.

America has represented values of material plenty, individual freedom, and democracy. It also has the world’s most powerful media, being the first to develop efficient mass-production of culture. Hollywood and US television networks retain a global lead. But since over half Hollywood’s profits now come from abroad, it has countered the stiling effects of sub-titles and dubbing by reducing the number of words per minute. Narrative drive, action, sex and violence do not communicate many values. US TV sales abroad declined as consumers turned to locally-produced shows, usually for about 7 of the top TV 10 programs. “The worldwide television market is growing”, said the president of Walt Disney Television, “but America’s place in it is declining”. Global opinion polls reveal steadily rising criticism of US government policies, with especial dislike of US policy toward Israel and Iraq. A poll in 2003 concluded that “the bottom has fallen out of support for America in most of the Muslim world.”⁷ The US is losing the ideological struggle in the Muslim world. Suicide bombers killing Americans are more often seen as freedom-fighters than as evil-doers.

The Bush administration expected that Americans would be greeted as liberators in Iraq. Yet US policies had alienated most Iraqis, both as nationalists and as Muslims. The Bush war against terrorism continues to discriminate against Muslims. The President blatantly sides with Sharon against the Palestinians. 10,000 Muslims were killed in Afghanistan for no significant improvement in the country. The new imperialists told a stream of lies about Iraq’s supposed weapons of mass destruction and terrorists. Then Iraqis experienced it themselves. In 2003 the US killed over 15,000 Iraqis in six months, a rate of killing Saddam had not matched since 1991. Frightened US troops brandished lethal weapons, shouting “Stop!” in English at check-points – symbolizing their near-complete ideological failure to communicate to Iraqis.

⁷ The Pew Global Attitudes Project *What the world thinks in 2002, & Views of a Changing World, 2003*. Washington, DC: The Pew Center for the People and the Press

Iraq is not Vietnam. It is an even bigger defeat. Defeat in Vietnam was by large well-trained armies; in Iraq it is by gangs.

In the Age of Nationalism, aiding the US after it has invaded your country makes you a traitor. The nations of the world are now held responsible for their own destinies. Outside intervention must be justified by extreme conditions, as the UN Charter states; and intervention must be quick and beneficent. This is a higher standard than the Roman or British Empires could have met. The first years of their conquests were usually mired in the blood of civilian casualties, but this mattered little to the rest of the world. Today the world's dominant ideologies, carried through mass media, contradict **any** imperialism. That is the fundamental ideological problem confronting the new imperialists. Even many in the supposed imperialist camp lack heart and soul for the task of repression. American military power converts the American Dream of peace, democracy and plenty into a Phantom, disappearing as foreigners draw closer to it.

Blowback

Iraq is not the only war America is losing. New terrorists created by US policy moved into Iraq, converted by the US into a failed state. Despite massive international cooperation which struck down many existing terrorists, new, younger terrorists struck in Casablanca, Riyadh and especially in Iraq. The US State Department was forced to change its 2003 "Patterns of Terrorism" Report to admit that the number of terrorist attacks had grown greatly since 9-11.

But there is a fatal flaw in the American war against terrorism. The US fails to distinguish between national and international terrorists. Administration statements routinely name "Al-Qaeda, Hamas and Hezbollah" as the terrorist enemy. But of these three only Al-Qaeda is attacking Americans. International terrorists like Al Qaeda aim at international targets. They are principally attacking American imperialism, though many others become victims of their atrocities. Whatever the rights and wrongs of the past policies which created Al Qaeda, it is attacking us and we must fight back. Luckily, Al Qaeda is quite exposed. Its adherents are emigres, operating in alien environments, and their bombings usually kill more locals than Americans or Westerners. They have killed the citizens of over 80 countries, and so the governments of over 80 countries are co-operating in tracking them down. Provided we focused on this enemy alone, we could win this "war".

But the US also opposes national terrorists. These, like Hamas, Hezbollah, the Moro Liberation Front in the Philippines, and Chechen and Kashmiri groups, only attack those they say is their local oppressor. They claim to be "national liberation fighters". The more powerful ones win considerable support from their own people, forcing their local oppressor to use state terrorism to fight them. Many national terrorists are quite deeply rooted in the age of nation-states. It is unwise of the US to attack them as well – for then they will also attack America. Instead, the US should bring its power to bear in pressuring both sides in these national disputes to settle their dispute. For example, the US should put equal pressure on Sharon and Arafat, the legitimate leaders of their sides. Additionally, the US might give more generous aid to Muslim countries to

help repair the harm recently done to US interests amongst them. More generally, a greater commitment against world poverty and disease would help.

But at present US policies seem calculated to alienate the Muslim world and produce more international terrorists. It is hard to think in recent times of a foreign policy that was so counter-productive. Note that the US has been thwarted not by great power rivals, by Europe, Russia or China – but by Muslims from weak, unhappy countries, riven by internal conflicts. The wretched of the earth have stopped the American Empire. Some power has shifted to the South of the world – ideologically, politically and even in certain respects militarily.

If abandoned, these disastrous imperial policies need not leave a very harmful legacy, for power realities would remain. The US would remain the economic leader and holder of the reserve currency. It would be the political leader in supposedly “multi-lateral” organizations. It might regain global ideological leadership by re-asserting American virtues. It remains the only Power capable of projecting military force around the world. Of course, in the long-run relative American decline will continue. Its economic power has already declined relative to Europe and Japan, and is now beginning to decline relative to China and India. It should be a long and graceful decline. However, the new Bush administration seems reluctant to abandon its new imperialism. It has purged the CIA of dissidents, Colin Powell has given up, the President promises firmer and firmer action. If he is as good as his word, the new American empire will decline much more rapidly. This has been the first failed empire of the 21st century. There may not be a second one.