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Imperial America and the Common Interest

James Chace

Who would now deny that America is an imperial power? The American response to the attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon was swift and merciless. Thousands of troops swept down upon Afghanistan in an effort to capture or kill the terrorists and their protectors. The Afghan war as such lasted only a few weeks. The continuing search to root out terrorists worldwide and those who harbor them has no end point. As the usually cautious secretary of state, Colin Powell, echoing the president, declared in February at the World Economic Forum in New York, the United States will “go after terrorism wherever it threatens free men and women,” even if that means taking “evil regimes” head on.

American military power is awesome—on land, on the seas, and in the air. President George W. Bush has called for a defense budget that will reach \$451 billion in 2007. We now spend more for defense than the next 15 industrialized countries combined, or 40 percent of what the rest of the world spends.¹ Moreover, despite America’s commitment to such a bloated military budget, our economic strength is such that America can afford to do so. Of course this means that public spending on health care and education will almost certainly suffer. There has been no outcry, however, for cutting military spending, especially in the wake of the September 11 attacks.

During the recent global recession, the economic weight of the United States was such that Europe, its only potential economic rival, could not act as a locomotive to pull the world out of its economic dol-

drums. With the apparent American recovery this spring, the likelihood is for a general global recovery, America leading the way.

What therefore is the nature of this American imperium? How did it come about? And what should its role be in the twenty-first century?

Almost two decades ago, the historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. referred to America’s empire as an “informal” one, not colonial in the traditional sense of using military forces and colonial administrators to run territory acquired and occupied by the imperial power, often against the wishes of the locals. Rather, in Schlesinger’s words, it was one “richly equipped with imperial paraphernalia: troops, ships, planes, bases, proconsuls, local collaborators, all spread wide around the luckless planet.”²

What I propose to do is to discuss the growth and reach of the American imperium not by emphasizing its economic dimension—for example, that the United States expanded in order to seek and secure markets—but rather by showing that its expansion came about primarily because Americans wanted to feel safe. Even as the United States has quite clearly become an economic giant, whose prosperity fuels global prosperity and whose economic travails infect even such economic leviathans as the European Union, the growth of the American empire has come about not so much through a search for economic well-being as through a quest for absolute security, that is to say, invulnerability.

Although U.S. political and military leaders want to ensure the interest and

security of the state, which has also meant promoting trade and foreign investment, there is also a peculiarly American cast of mind that has linked this quest for absolute security to American exceptionalism. In essence, this was the belief that America was a great experiment, fraught with risk but animated by the conviction—as John Winthrop, the first governor of Massachusetts, famously described it in 1630 aboard a ship off the New England coast—that America should be “as a city upon a hill,” the eyes of all people upon us, and if we should fail to make this city a beacon of hope and decency, and “deal falsely with our God,” we should be cursed.

At times, this has given Americans a messianic mission to redeem the world, as Woodrow Wilson believed; at other times even the founders of the nation, who preferred to see the United States as a model for all mankind, believed that the infant American republic was “a rising empire.” “Extend the sphere,” wrote James Madison in the 1780s, evoking the image of an “extended republic” as “one great, respectable, and flourishing empire.”³

While the United States expanded, seeking new territories by intimidation and treaty, as in the acquisition of Florida in 1819, or by military action, as in the Mexican War of 1846, it coupled its quest for absolute security with a belief in its own moral superiority, seeing itself as either an example for the world or a crusader for an empire of liberty. With this heritage, can America today find common ground with other great powers, such as the European Union, China, Russia, Japan, and India, seeking areas of shared interest that will prevent a balance of power being organized against us?

Solitude, Not Isolation

Since the earliest days of the Republic, the United States has sought to ensure the territorial integrity of the nation without the assistance of outside powers. Of course, Amer-

icans have on occasion also found it in their interest to follow George Washington’s advice to “safely trust to *temporary* alliances for extraordinary emergencies.” This was notably true with the treaty of alliance with France, signed in 1778, without which America could not have won its independence at the time. But in 1800, the treaty with France was abrogated. The United States henceforth remained free from any long-term alliance until the founding of NATO in 1949.

As a whole, though eager to cooperate with other nations in economic matters, America has been singularly unwilling to allow others to dictate policy in questions of national safety. This unilateral approach to security has carried with it an implicit message that allies can inhibit America’s freedom of action, and thus undermine its security. For this reason, America has never shied away from employing force unilaterally—either in defense of its own borders or in foreign regions viewed as vital—in response to perceived threats to the security of the state.

To be sure, the American nation has gone to war for a variety of specific reasons: to expand territory and seek markets for economic gain; in response to affronts to the national honor—as in Jefferson’s military and naval actions against the Barbary pirates from 1801 to 1805; when attacked; and to play out the nation’s role as promoter of democratic values. Moreover, the overarching response to the American need for safety and well-being—from the assertion of the Monroe Doctrine to the current war on terrorism—has been to take unilateral action as the surest way to achieve national security. The Monroe Doctrine, which declared that the United States would not permit any foreign power to intervene in the Western Hemisphere, was echoed by Grover Cleveland, who insisted that Great Britain accept American arbitration in a dispute between Britain and Venezuela in 1895. William McKinley’s taking of the Philippines in the

Spanish-American War, and Woodrow Wilson's military interventions in Mexico in 1914 and 1916, continued this policy.

This is not to say that all American political leaders believed absolute security was an immediately attainable goal. But for well over two centuries this aspiration has been seen as central to an effective American foreign policy—and never more so than at the outset of the twenty-first century, with the terrorist attacks against New York's World Trade Center and the Pentagon.

Political leaders have only two basic tools at their disposal when enforcing the national interest—diplomacy and force. But diplomatic negotiation implies compromise. Absolute security, however, cannot be negotiated; it can only be won. Achieving invulnerability in this manner is a lonely task.

The American reluctance to use diplomatic means before resorting to military force as a way of ensuring national security cannot be viewed as isolationism. Despite the popular myth to the contrary, the United States has never been isolationist. Even in the period between the two World Wars, America was isolationist only toward Europe, and even there international naval reductions agreements were signed between the United States and the European nations; in the Western Hemisphere, especially in Central America and the Caribbean, the United States was openly interventionist; and in East Asia and the Western Pacific it played an active role.

The Margin of Safety

To be sure, most American leaders have fully appreciated the large measure of safety from external threats—what has been called “free security”—that America's geographical position offered and may have also contributed to the belief that absolute security could be achieved. As Thomas Jefferson said, the fact that the United States was “separated by nature and a wide ocean from the exterminating havoc of one quarter of the globe” was a blessing to the cause of

American security. Today, the development of missiles has reduced the margin of safety the oceans once provided. But even before the air age, no American leader, including Jefferson, has ever been prepared to see the nation's safety rely on that blessing alone. Military interventions—not only in the Western Hemisphere but in all parts of the world—have been viewed as necessary to safeguard the American people.

Until the First World War, real or perceived threats to the nation's security were physical. For example, our activist foreign policy in the early and late nineteenth century centered on our continued anxiety over British meddling in the Western Hemisphere following the War of 1812. But that policy did not disappear when the presumed British threat clearly evaporated after 1895. At the turn of that century, with the closing of the continental frontier, American leaders feared that such rising naval powers as Germany and Japan threatened access to foreign markets in East Asia.

In the years immediately before and after the First World War, however, radical ideologies of the left and right gravely affected the American perception of security. Threats from anarchism, communism, and fascism, while not purely territorial, were nonetheless seen as perils that could undermine the strength and even the physical safety of the American commonwealth by promoting internal dissent and civil strife. These threats were countered by American presidents, most notably Woodrow Wilson, not only by curbing civil liberties at home but also by exporting American liberal democracy—more often than not imposed by American troops—to Latin America, Europe, and Asia.

Traditional territorial fears thus merged with ideological threats in determining America's international behavior. During the Second World War, and the Cold War that followed it, these anxieties prompted the adoption of internationalist policies unprecedented in their global scope, and the

expansion of American power worldwide. Beginning with the Reagan presidency, and now seen as a legacy of the Cold War, the need for a universal response to both physical and ideological threats has finally resulted in a National Missile Defense program that takes our historic quest for absolute security into a new realm—outer space.⁴

Since the time of the American Revolution, however, there have also been American leaders who have warned us that the goal of absolute security was, in Alexander Hamilton's words, a "deceitful dream," one based on false confidence in American moral exceptionalism, and on exaggerated fears that the United States, because of its democratic government and its wealth of natural resources, had been targeted for attack by foreign powers. But Hamilton's words were largely disregarded by later generations. To understand why his words went unheeded, one has to understand the roots of America's exceptionalism, its belief in itself as divinely guided, its mission to build here as elsewhere Winthrop's city on the hill.

The Missionary Impulse

Except for Hamilton's warning that Americans were no exception "from the imperfection, weaknesses and evils incident to society in every shape," the critique of American perfectibility came not in political discourse but in the writings of the classic American novelists, notably Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville. They knew that this vision of an untrammelled world that could be made over into an idealized American image was dangerously simplistic; on the contrary, everything is impure, even the brave new world of America, and everything is limited, even American possibilities.

Melville, whose masterpiece, *Moby Dick*, was dedicated to Hawthorne, at first seemed to be the quintessential American optimist, the man of action. "We are the pioneers of the world," he wrote in *White Jacket*, "the advance guard set out through the wilder-

ness of untried things to break a path in the New World." But later his tales darkened. In "Benito Cereno," he wrote the story of an American sea captain, Amasa Delano, who comes upon a drifting Spanish slave ship and, innocently, boards it to help. What he does not realize is that the captain, Benito Cereno, has been taken captive by the slaves, who have revolted and seized the ship. When Delano himself is threatened by the slaves, he asks, bewildered, "But who would want to kill Amasa Delano?" Unwittingly, he had been drawn into the evils of the Old World. Experience, in the guise of the Spanish sea captain, is akin to corruption; the revolt of the slaves is like a rush from darkness into light. Yet, paradoxically, that revolt threatened the enlightened American's life.

In his story "The Birthmark," Hawthorne describes a single blemish that disturbs the beauty of the wife of the scientist Aylmer. The mark itself is in the shape of a small red hand against her pale skin, a symbol of the wife's liability to "sin, sorrow, decay, and death." These very characteristics are, of course, the sign of mortality. But Aylmer cannot accept them. In attempting to enforce man's control over nature, he gives his wife a potion he has invented to remove the flaw. The experiment appears to succeed, for the birthmark fades away. Her beauty is perfect. But she is dead. Thus, the quest for perfection ends in death.⁵

A literature tending to subvert the extraordinary freedom of action Americans had in pursuing their country's exceptional destiny was disregarded—except when read as tales of adventure and gothic mystery. Throughout the nineteenth century and much of the twentieth, the U.S. government seldom admitted anything less than a moral vision of the world, in which Americans, virtuous and right, sought perfection on a continent whose vast natural resources seemed to promise autarky and, more important, invulnerability. Moreover, U.S. foreign policy was singularly successful. It en-

sured American security from the Atlantic to the Pacific, and seemed bent on removing all direct threats to the new republic.

At the same time, the expansionists of the nineteenth century generally saw America as an exemplar of freedom in the tradition of John Winthrop. John Quincy Adams, arguably the greatest secretary of state prior to the twentieth century, cautioned us not to go abroad “in search of monsters to destroy,” but to be “the well-wisher to the freedom and independence of all.... the champion and vindicator only of our own.” He warned America not to enlist under other banners than her own, “were they even the banners of foreign independence.” Should America do so, the “fundamental maxims of her policy would insensibly change from *liberty* to *force*.... She might become the dictatress of the world. She would no longer be the ruler of her own spirit.”

By the time of the First World War, however, Woodrow Wilson picked up the crusader strand in American exceptionalism and became the very personification of the democratic mission, a man who believed that only by interfering in the affairs of other nations could the United States wage its campaign of self-determination for all peoples. Unable to compromise with his domestic opponents over the issue of American participation in the League of Nations, Wilson remained convinced of the unique mission of the United States. In his last speech, made in 1919, when he was urging ratification of the league by the Senate, he spoke of the American soldiers who had died crusading for a new world of democratic nations: “I wish some men in public life who are now opposing the settlement for which these men died.... could feel the moral obligation that rests upon us not to go back on those boys, but to see the thing through, to see it through to the end and make good their redemption of the world. For nothing less depends on this decision, nothing less than the liberation and salvation of the

world.” As we know, the Senate refused to ratify the league.

It was not until the election of Franklin Delano Roosevelt that the United States found a president who combined the idealistic aspirations of the Founders to create a republic of virtue and their realistic appraisal of the need to seek *temporary* alliances to ensure America’s security. Like Hamilton, Roosevelt counseled against the dangers of exceptionalism: “Perfectionism, no less than isolationism or imperialism or power politics, may obstruct the paths to international peace.” Like Hamilton’s, his warnings were largely disregarded as the Cold War came to dominate the American political scene.

Indeed, throughout the decades of the Cold War, the idea of America as a crusader, as a force for freedom, seems to have become engraved on the national consciousness. But spreading freedom, or making the world safe for democracy, if it is to be America’s peculiar destiny, is likely to be a lonely task. America’s allies have not generally shared its missionary zeal. More than they have cared to admit, they have agreed with Gen. Charles de Gaulle’s view that America, in its turn, would cloak its will to power in the raiment of idealism.

The American Conscience

Nonetheless, American foreign policy is likely to be most successful when accompanied by strong moral values. These values can be expressed not only by creating a domestic polity that aspires to John Quincy Adams’s model that America act as an exemplar of freedom and democracy, but also by embracing by word *and* deed the international institutions that respond to our deepest values. That quintessential realist Walter Lippmann, after the Kennedy administration’s misguided attempt to overthrow Cuba’s Fidel Castro at the Bay of Pigs, wrote: “A policy is bound to fail which deliberately violates our pledges and our principles, our treaties and our laws.” He reminded Americans that “the American conscience is a

reality. It will make hesitant and ineffectual, even if it does not prevent, an un-American policy.”⁶

Which brings us to the present condition of the United States—an imperial power the like of which has not been seen in the West since ancient Rome. Not only has President Bush embarked on a worldwide crusade to eradicate terrorism, but he hopes through these vast endeavors to bring about a great and durable peace.

The Common Interest

In modern times after each major war, the peacemakers have searched for a way to achieve such a lasting peace. Although the Cold War lasted almost half a century, the victors—in this case, the United States and the Western allies—did not come up with a new approach to the perennial problem of keeping nations and peoples from homicidal conflict. Even suggestions for improving the work of the United Nations in this respect—a standing military force to prevent or quell conflict, enlargement of the Security Council to include permanent representation of such regional powers as India, Brazil, and South Africa—have gone nowhere.

The realist historian David Fromkin, author of *A Peace to End All Peace*, has written that in a world of independent states, we cannot achieve a lasting peace because there is nobody to prevent war. His warning that America is neither strong enough to govern the world nor wise enough to provide political direction for other peoples has never been more salient. With these strictures in mind, we nonetheless need to ask ourselves if there are common interests among the great powers that the United States shares that can both satisfy America’s moral concerns and allay its fears for the security of the nation.

Fromkin also referred to the “common interest,” which Franklin Delano Roosevelt spoke of when he met with Winston Churchill in Morocco during the Second World War, conjuring up a future in which

there would be compulsory education, immunization against disease, and universal birth control. Now, more than half a century later, what seems to be developing in Europe and the United States is an increased emphasis on the moral dimension in international politics.

Surely, a long-term American policy should seek to promote a sense of shared values among the most powerful nations in the world, that is, those countries which, working together, can impose a peaceful settlement on unruly regions. Such was the case in Europe during the roughly 40 years that followed the Congress of Vienna, when the Concert of Europe operated with a reasonable degree of effectiveness. This was so even while the two relatively liberal powers, Britain and France, had serious ideological differences with the three autocratic powers, Russia, Austria, and Prussia, and with each other.⁷

Could the United States, working with the European Union, Russia, China, and Japan find enough common ground to act in the common interest by preventing major conflicts among nations?

And in those instances where violence does not arise from the ambitions of traditional nation-states, as has recently been the case, but from terrorist activities that may be linked across borders, can the present war bind together the great powers in efforts to stamp out terrorism—since the absence of terrorism is in the national interest of these same powers?

In short, even in a world that may never be ready for a global superstate or world government, does this preclude a future concert of powers that see it in their respective national interests to cooperate over a wide range of issues that afflict mankind? After all, there are treaties that are largely supported by many nations—the treaty creating the International Criminal Court, the Kyoto Protocol on halting global warming, the Comprehensive Nuclear Test-Ban Treaty, the agreements on curbing biological war-

fare—all of which, if ratified by the great powers, might go a long way toward realizing a new vision of the common interest.

Unfortunately, the United States has been foremost in asserting its unwillingness to sign virtually anything that might limit its sovereignty. This not only harks back to the tradition of acting alone but is also characteristic of an imperial power whose refusal to cede its authority to a supranational authority cannot be overruled by others. Despite the lip service paid to multilateralism, the Bush administration has threatened to use force against any nation that might be developing biological, chemical, and nuclear weapons that could theoretically threaten the United States. Specifically, Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz warned that a preemptive strike aimed “at prevention, not merely punishment” awaits those who oppose America’s will and jeopardize its sense of security.⁸

An evolving Bush Doctrine thus emerged in the president’s State of the Union address in January, when he labeled Iraq, Iran, and North Korea an “axis of evil” that he would not permit to threaten America with weapons of mass destruction. To combat such a buildup, the president said he would not “wait upon events while dangers gather,” nor “stand by as peril draws closer and closer,” a statement that surely implies the use of conventional forces—or even tactical nuclear weapons—in preventive strikes against missile launchers and other facilities that might be involved in the creation and production of weapons of mass destruction.⁹

A plan to develop new types of nuclear weapons precisely for the purpose of striking targets in Iraq, Iran, North Korea, Syria, and Libya was revealed in a Pentagon report known as the Nuclear Posture Review, in which high priority is given to creating an earth-penetrating, nuclear-tipped bunker buster. Should developing such a weapon require nuclear testing, ending the voluntary moratorium on such tests that now restrains

nuclear programs in such countries as Iran and North Korea, the anti-proliferation effort to curb the spread of nuclear weapons would surely be shattered.¹⁰ Replying to these criticisms, National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice declared that the way to deter the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction was to be clear that this “would be met with a devastating response.”¹¹

President Bush also called for the development and deployment of “effective missile defenses” to protect the nation against sudden attack. While research and deployment of a limited missile defense is clearly in the offing, it would be an historical anomaly were the United States to develop such a system and then restrict it to a limited defensive capability. If a theater defense can merge into a national defense, other nuclear powers would be right to expect the United States to deploy a comprehensive defensive missile force if this were technologically feasible.

American Messianism

In this respect, invulnerability would seem at last in sight. While disclaiming any intention of “imposing our culture,” the president struck a note of American messianism by listing “nonnegotiable demands”—“the rule of law, limits on the power of the state, respect for women, private property, free speech, equal justice and religious tolerance.”¹²

Although Bush again and again referred to working closely with “our coalition” to defeat terrorism, his endorsement of the unilateral use of American power to disarm “the world’s most dangerous regimes [that] threaten us with the world’s most destructive weapons” is likely to make it even more difficult to find allies willing to give blanket approval to such a strategy. In the wake of the president’s address, the accusation of the French foreign minister, calling Bush’s worldview “simplistic” and criticizing America for “making decisions based on its own view of the world and its own

interests,”¹³ may have been harsh, but his criticisms were shared by other American allies. Echoing his French colleague, German foreign minister Joschka Fischer declared that the “international coalition against terror is not the foundation to carry out just anything against anybody.... All the European foreign ministers see it that way. Throwing Iran, North Korea and Iraq into one pot.... Where does that lead us?”¹⁴

An imperial power such as the United States may well conclude that its values are universal values. But were the United States to link its national interest—and hence its values—to a search for the common interest, the redefinition of the nation’s vital interests might very well shape a different world in the twenty-first century.

Realism and a Moral Consensus

Of course, unless these changes are discussed and presented to the vast public in terms of interests, they are unlikely to be supported. Even Hans Morgenthau, the preeminent theorist of twentieth-century realism, argued that it was a moral consensus for moderation, rather than the balance of power, that brought about relative stability for the four decades after the Congress of Vienna. This did not mean that Morgenthau was dismissing the balance of power as a means of containing conflict, but rather that he believed stability was more likely if the balance was underpinned by a moral consensus.

Such shared values, however, seem unlikely so long as the United States, in an era of unparalleled American predominance, prefers to go it alone. Already the Bush administration has agreed to intervene in a number of countries that, in Washington’s view, are either sponsors or victims of terrorism. These include—in addition to Afghanistan—Yemen, the Philippines, Georgia, and possibly Indonesia, as well as Colombia (whose decades-long conflict with leftist rebels was previously supported by the United States as part of the war on drugs; now American aid to quell the in-

surgency will be deemed an effort to combat terrorism). The administration is also likely to take some military action against Iraq and will apparently do so with or without allied support.

This inclination to act unilaterally, stemming from the traditional American preference to define the national interest without the constraint of allies, has only been strengthened by America’s economic and military prowess. With such power undergirded by a belief in America’s moral exceptionalism, the most dangerous threat to American omnipotence may very well come about as a result of the alienation of Europe and Japan, and the wariness of China and Russia. The duration of the American imperium will thus depend on our ability to seek common ends with potential rivals. In this respect, we have more to fear from our own mistakes than from those enemies who are now determined to bring us down. ●

Notes

1. For Powell’s statement and defense budget figures, see the *New York Times*, February 2, 2002; see also the *New York Times*, February 5, 2002; and *The Economist*, March 9, 2002, p. 32.

2. See Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., “America and Empire,” in *The Cycles of American History* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1986), p. 141.

3. Cited in Schlesinger, *Cycles of American History*, p. 129.

4. See James Chace and Caleb Carr, *America Invulnerable: The Quest for Absolute Security from 1812 to Star Wars* (New York: Summit Books, 1988), Prologue.

5. See James Chace, “How Moral Can We Get?” *New York Times Magazine*, May 17, 1977; see also Harry Levin, *The Power of Blackness* (New York: Random House, 1958).

6. Walter Lippmann, “Today and Tomorrow,” *New York Herald Tribune*, May 9, 1961.

7. See James Chace and Nicholas X. Rizopoulos, “Toward a New Concert of Nations: An American Perspective,” *World Policy Journal*, vol. 16 (fall 1999).

8. Cited in an editorial, *The Guardian* (London), February 7, 2002.

9. "President Bush's State of the Union Address to Congress," *New York Times*, January 30, 2002.

10. "America as Nuclear Rogue," editorial, *New York Times*, March 12, 2002; *The Economist*, March 16, 2002, pp. 15, 35.

11. Quoted in Joe Conason, "Powell Quiets Fears of Bush's Nuke Talk," *New York Observer*, March 18, 2002.

12. "President Bush's State of the Union Address," *New York Times*.

13. Suzanne Daley, "French Foreign Minister Calls U.S. Policy 'Simplistic,'" *New York Times*, February 7, 2002.

14. Steven Erlanger, "Germany Joins Europe's Cry That the U.S. Won't Consult," *New York Times*, February 13, 2002.