

## *Empires Real and Imagined*

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Like many subjects in the mainstream media, the subject of empire is bastardized or just plain misunderstood. I doubt that many on Fox news, for example — the source of choice for too many Americans, know the much about the history of empires anywhere in the world, from ancient Rome to the British colonies. There are, of course, extremely knowledgeable writers about empires past and present — notably, the British (of course) author Niall Ferguson. But again as in many subject areas, there is a disconnect between the intelligentsia — or even people who just plain *think* — and their world of books, cerebral documentaries and so on, and the great masses, who, even if they possess an education often choose not to use it. The media, especially television caters to this latter lot, and the intellectuals have done little to bridge the gap. Forget the red and blue states — there are those that think about these things and those that don't.

Which brings us back to empire: thinking about it is not just an intellectual exercise these days — every day, our men and women (not to mention their men and women and children) are being shot and blown up because of this. We need to all understand what kind of empire-building — if that is even accurate — that the United States is engaged in. Your tax dollars are at work here, like it or not. So understand it.

The issue of empire for Americans is complex. Our first reaction is to deny it: we live in a democracy, we don't invade other countries to build empires. A more measured reaction, one that looks at a bit of history, reveals that we have been building an empire of sorts for quite some time, at least in different periods in our history. The Philippines, liberated from Spain only to become beholden to the U.S., and small territories in the Pacific, including the Marianas Islands (source of a lot of cheap labor in the textile trade, by the way) and Guam that were “annexed” later. There's Puerto Rico — another “prize” from the Spaniards — and Hawai'i, which was liberated by the U.S. from its own indigenous government. Of course, too, there is the continental U.S., which we liberated from the various indigenous peoples already *in situ*.

So, empire — taking land from other people and making it your own — has been going on for a long time. But when we usually talk about empire, it's something a little more subtle than that. It's not just taking over land — it's imposing your culture, values, and laws over another people.

There are defenders of this kind of empire-building, to be sure. One can find the pseudo-Darwinian argument of “survival of the fittest” as applied to peoples and civilizations, i.e., if one civilization is more technologically sophisticated and better organized militarily, then by natural law they should be allowed to conquer other civilizations — particularly “native” ones. Or one might hear of the “civilizing” mission of empire; didn't the British bring a certain measure of peace and stability to their African colonies, not to mention roads, schools, and hospitals? I'm not going to argue against these two ideas here — my point is not to make a statement about empire on those terms.

What I am talking about is *understanding* empire, and then deciding, well, to have one or not. For the Roman culture, for example, empire was understood as imposing the Roman system on territories from the distant Atlantic lands of Portugal to the northern reaches of England to the civilized but decadent societies of the Near East. There was little question about it; the Romans conquered lands militarily, and then Romans settled there. The local occupants had little choice but to become Romanized. At archaeological sites, the basic Roman town plan with amphitheater, temple, etc. can be seen today everywhere from France to North Africa. Romans felt that their society represented an apogee of civilized life (much of borrowed from the Greeks, certainly), and that their military was the vehicle to bring this civilized life to the regions beyond Italy.

For the British, economics played a role in the building of their empire, but the nature of empire itself was still quite clear. One took over a place, and put the British “template” on the existing society. Indeed, it was seen as a civilizing mission, with Christianity the spiritual template to go along with economic, legal, and military elements. Ah, those fine colonial recruits, with their native headgear, but trim British khakis and a rifle at the shoulder! Even early on in this “modern” period of imperialism, there were those who had problems with the idea. In the American colonies, many felt that the system was economically exploitative. Later, some in Europe were disturbed by the activities of the Belgians in King Leopold's Congo lands. But countries — Britain, France, Germany, and so on — all had colonies. And they had an entire imperial apparatus to control, manage, and exploit the conquered territories.

The contemporary United States seems to understand none of this. Recent administrations have spoken of exporting democracy (Iraq), or removing “evil” leaders (Iraq, North Korea, Venezuela, Cuba), “stabilizing” countries (Somalia), or “securing” certain regions

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(Panama) every time they plan, threaten, or engage in a military action. The most recent example of this kind of wishy-washy verbiage is the claim that Hugo Chavez, the leader of Venezuela is “not cooperating in the war on terrorism.” As Chavez himself might well say, such language lacks *cojones*. No administration will simply come out and say: “We’re going to invade another country because we want its resources, and we want to run it according to the U.S. model, which we think is the best.” Why are we so afraid of those Roman and British models? If we are so keen on invading other countries, why do we not train, as both the Romans and the British did, an imperial staff? Where are the proconsuls, the colonial governors?

Americans have what seems to be a twisted pathology about the current war, one that comes from this imperial dilemma. On the one hand, we feel that we should respect other cultures like we were taught in school; on the other hand, we feel that certain peoples are simply beyond the pale — crazy radicals, with a strange, fractious religion that makes them blow themselves and others up. Part of us feels that the American way to is live and let live, to be a peaceful giant, but not an aggressor. But another part of us feels that the American *material* way of life, not to mention the wonder of participatory democracy, is so great that we really must bring it to everyone — even if by force.

The current administration feels that it must temper its message on the war. *Of course* we are there to unseat an evil dictator and bring democracy. Saying that we are there to conquer the land, take the resources, and impose by force an alien system of laws and governance just won’t sell the American people. The administration gets into trouble because the images and messages are hard to reconcile: soldier in full battle gear, and American helicopters shooting into urban areas, versus the pitch that “we saved these people from the horrors of Saddam.” I am sure that the administration’s PR people are quite busy these days.

This dilemma, this contortion, again is from a failure of will. The administration should have said overtly, “We are on an imperial mission, and we will do whatever is necessary to build the empire.” They could have added: “Now we know that this might offend the sensibilities of even our most right-wing citizens, but it is necessary at this point in our history.” Then the rest of us could have truly hated the administration, because their anachronistic, even retrograde goal of brutal military conquest would have been clearly defined. We could also have respected them for their *cojones*. That’s what enemies do.

On the liberal side, then, there has been a failure, too. Some liberals have jumped on board in the rejoicing over the unseating of Saddam. They forget that we supported him, we shook hands with the “madman”, we used him to the fullest against Iran. The liberals also have been seduced by the alleged “democratizing” process in Iraq and Afghanistan;

if the very process of democracy relies on popular participation, how can such a process begin with a war that most people here were against and a war that most people there I doubt wanted?

And the liberals, too, have gotten into their own contortions believing in justifiable wars. They have refused to call this war, and other U.S. wars of recent decades — such as the now almost forgotten invasion of Panama — for what they are: part of a revived (but *neither neo- nor quasi-*) imperialism.

When I teach history classes to university students, I always ask them, “Why do we study history?” They all give me the answer they learned in high school, “We study the past so that we avoid the same mistakes.” It is a facile and grossly incorrect answer. We continuously repeat the mistakes of the past, only a grander and bloodier scale. Thinking people study history either out of intellectual curiosity or, perhaps, to indeed avoid mistakes, if only on a very small and local level. The rest hardly even study history. So they repeat whatever their basest nature tells them, and has told people before them to do: invade, conquer, possess.

Both sides need to study history intensely right now. The right needs to come clean and admit fearlessly what it is doing. The British always made clear references to the Romans in their process of empire-building — indeed, every British colonial administrator had a classical education, and you can bet they had read Caesar’s *Gallic Wars* — in the original Latin. The left needs to take a solid anti-imperial and anti-war stance. They need to understand and to expound the idea that war and conquest are inefficient, inhuman, and ultimately suicidal ways for societies to conduct themselves.

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