

National Sovereignty & Universal Challenges: Choices for the World After Iraq

Briefing Paper No. 2

“America As Empire: Global Leader Or Rogue Imperium?”

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The United States has become what it was founded not to be. Established as a haven for those fleeing the abuse of power, it has attained and now wields nearly absolute power. It has become an empire. This is meant as a statement of fact, not a judgment of national character. It is a way of understanding America, not an indictment against American policy. Indeed, by opening up the possibility of viewing the United States as an empire, one opens up a far larger frame of reference to understand America's history, role in the world, and future responsibilities.

Of all governing institutions, empire is the most complex and extensive in scope. Empire stands at the apex of the social, economic and political pyramid, integrating all tribes, nations and institutions beneath it within a unified order. An empire that is well run is the greatest accolade a nation can receive. An empire devastated is the most damning legacy it can leave behind.

Empires are relationships of influence and control by one state over a group of lesser states. This can take a variety of forms, ranging from territorial annexation and direct political rule to economic domination and diplomatic oversight. Empires are as old as history itself and characterize the earliest stages of human development. For reasons deeply buried in the human soul and psyche, human beings have always competed against one another, and the victors have established dominion over the vanquished and exploited that relationship to benefit themselves. Almost every people on earth has at some point or another expanded and conquered or contracted and been conquered, often many times over and in a variety of combinations.

Viewed historically, the United States is stronger with regard to the rest of the world than any power in the history of the world. It has become a power without peer, controlling nations far beyond its borders and able to operate decisively in virtually any sphere at any level anywhere in the world. As Michael Ignatieff put it in his article “American Empire” in the *New York Times Sunday Magazine*, “It is the only nation that polices the world through five global military commands; maintains more than a million men and women at arms on four continents; deploys carrier battle groups on watch in every ocean; guarantees the survival of countries from Israel to South Korea; drives the wheels of global trade and commerce; and fills the hearts and minds of an entire planet with its dreams and desires.”

The United States has become what French political theorist Raymond Aron calls an “imperial republic.” It is an imperial power dominating the international order through military, economic and cultural strength, while simultaneously being a sovereign state, existing within a system of sovereign states equal under international law. The tensions implied by this dual identity are something that must be managed but cannot be fully resolved. As such, different rules apply to the United States, different expectations must be made of it, and different consequences will come of its actions, especially since the United States has such a dialectical mixture of democratic idealism and practical power.

Ironically, the inordinate and unique power of the United States was not immediately recognized when the Berlin Wall came down in 1989 and the Soviet Union disintegrated, either by the Americans or by the rest of the world. While a few observers recognized that America had entered what columnist Charles Krauthammer called a “unipolar moment,” most commentators predicted that the demise of the Soviet Union and end of the Cold War would lead to a return to the age-old balance of powers.

Such a view was completely understandable. The last 1,500 years of European history have been essentially multipolar, with the major European powers incessantly competing with one another but without any single power ever gaining undue advantage, whether during the medieval era of city states or the modern era of nation states. Even Britain at its prime during the nineteenth century was constrained by France, Russia, Spain and Germany. During the reign of Queen Victoria, from 1837 – 1901, which marked the apex of British imperial power, Britain had to fight seventy-two separate military campaigns to keep its rivals at bay and its colonial holdings intact. The very notion of *realpolitik* is predicated upon the assumption of a balance of power between major states.

The fact that the United States has broken out of this multipolar framework to attain unipolar global dominance is an extraordinary achievement in the annals of history, not attained by any power since the time of Rome two thousand years ago. Because the world had gotten so used to thinking in multilateral and multipolar terms, it took some time for the novelty of the historical situation to sink in. Yale historian Paul Kennedy, in his book *Decline of the Great Powers*, went so far as to predict the relative decline of the United States due to “imperial overstretch.” Talk of American weakness dominated the 1992 U.S. Presidential elections with the ultimate victor, Bill Clinton, focusing on fixing the ailing American economy while his rival for the Democratic nomination, Paul Tsongas, repeatedly declared, “The Cold War is over and Japan won.” Margaret Thatcher expressed the commonly held view that the world would evolve into three regional groups, one based on the dollar, one on the mark, one on the yen. Henry Kissinger solemnly predicted the emergence of a multipolar world. Asians, along with some American Asian enthusiasts such as James Fallows, spoke exuberantly of the rise of a “Pacific Century.”

The Clinton Administration (1993-2001) was essentially a transitional period when the United States was emerging as what French Foreign Minister Hubert Vedrine called a “hyper-power” but was still essentially multilateralist and collaborative in its mentality and behavior. The title of Richard Haas’ book, *The Reluctant Sheriff*, published in 1993, summarized in advance the legacy Clinton was to leave behind. Clinton’s main focus was the integration of the global economy under American hegemony, but he seldom used the power America had at its disposal, seeking rather to work collegially with American allies on issues of common concern. While believing that the U.S. was the “indispensable power,” as his Secretary of State Madeleine Albright put it, Clinton exercised this indispensability with discretion. He initiated limited military actions against Iraq and the Sudan and led the European coalition in Kosovo. But by and large he remained committed to multilateralism and upholding the international treaties negotiated by his predecessors, including the Antiballistic Missile Treaty and Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban. He also negotiated and supported the Kyoto Protocol on Global Warming.

All these treaties framed US strategic interests within the context of collective security considerations. In general, the 1990s were marked by a strong commitment to international law, working within the context of the UN system, and upholding pre-existent treaty obligations. America was certainly the senior partner in all deliberations but the emphasis by Americans and the larger world community was on the importance of partnership as much as on American seniority.

The response by the new Bush Administration to the events of September 11, 2001 changed all that by heightening asymmetries already there but unobserved because unexercised. Right at the point it was emerging as the undisputed superpower, the United States was attacked unexpectedly with devastating impact by non-state actors virtually invisible to the American intelligence apparatus. In one of the strangest synchronicities of modern history, a nation that thought itself invulnerable was made, without warning, completely vulnerable. Its response was to strike out with an overwhelming application of military power in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Since September 11, the United States has emphasized national security concerns and preemptive military responses in a war on terrorism that President Bush has declared as the highest priority of American domestic and foreign policy. Multilateralism, where the coalition defines the mission, has been replaced by unilateralism, where the mission defines the coalition. Deterrence, where there is an assumed balance of power, has been superseded by a policy of preemptive strikes, where the U.S. hits first against potential adversaries.

The prerogatives, complexities and shortcomings of America as an imperial republic came into sharp and painful relief during the U.S. invasion of Iraq. It was there that the magnitude of American power, as well as its limitations, were displayed before the world.

The events of 9/11 reframed global affairs within the context of national security and the war on terrorism. The invasion of Iraq reframed global affairs yet again within the reality of overwhelming American military power. The invasion was the occasion the Bush Administration chose to demonstrate American military supremacy to the world. What is extraordinary is that the U.S. exercised its global dominion by seizing the most strategic area in the Middle East.

The invasion of Iraq also brought into sharp relief fundamental changes in the world's perception of America. Fifty years ago, there was an almost universal expression of appreciation and respect for the generosity with which the United States rebuilt Europe and Japan after World War II, for its leadership in establishing the United Nations, and for its willingness to defend democracy from communism. People worldwide embraced America as the leader of the free world and aspired to the democratic ideals they believed America uniquely represented.

However, as the Cold War developed, this positive feeling increasingly turned to criticism, hostility and condemnation. The international community has become resentful at the way America exercises its power. While America certainly protected the free world during the Cold War, America also comported itself in a way that the world increasingly mistrusted. It now seems to many in the international community that U.S. relies more on force than on persuasion, abuses human rights more than it fosters democracy, and exploits the poor more than it protects the weak.

The Bush Administration's response to the events of September 11 dramatically increased the international public's concern about the integrity of America's leadership in the world. The invasion of Iraq in defiance of overwhelming opposition indicates to many that America, the global leader, has become America, the rogue imperium. Anti-American sentiment is on the rise virtually all over the world, including in Europe, traditionally America's strongest ally.

The questions that must be asked are: How did America become so strong? Why is America now acting in a manner that the world increasingly resents? What is going on in the rest of the world that America needs to understand? During and after World War II, American leadership and international needs were aligned. Now they are clearly out of any semblance of alignment. What has changed? What can be done to bring about a new sense of mutual purpose?

At the core of the relationship between America and the world is the issue of where the center of gravity should be for international affairs: the United States or the United Nations? This presents America and the world with a fundamental choice. At the end of World War II, the United States established the United Nations out of self-interest. Today, the United States disregards the United Nations out of a very different notion of self-interest. The United States founded the United Nations to help prevent war among the nations. The U.S. now considers the UN to be weak, corrupt, inefficient and bureaucratic. At the same time, the UN represents to most people, including many Americans, the desire for a community of nations, governed by the sanctity of international law and cooperating through dialogue and consensus. Whatever its flaws, it is the carrier of the deep human aspiration for peace. The Bush Administration's disparagement of the UN and its willingness to act alone in spite of the UN are of deep concern to the international public.

The challenge for the United Nations and the larger world community is the reality that the United States is no longer a nation among nations. It is an empire among nations, an absolutely key concept in understanding why America is acting the way it is and why the international community is so concerned. America has emerged as an unchallenged superpower, controlling countries and institutions all around the world. As such, it can and will assume certain imperial prerogatives, particularly in the immediate aftermath of September 11.

Both Americans and the world must understand this new reality, whatever the desire of the international community for consensus through the United Nations or for everyone to work together according to the legalities of international law. Empires invariably reserve the right to act in their own interests, precisely because, from an imperial point of view, might makes right. While America was founded as a beacon of light, symbolizing freedom, empires are inevitably about power, relying on force. In assessing American actions, the world must remember from history that military power is the beginning and the end of empire and that empires seek to weaken international law and international institutions in order to maximize maneuverability and maintain dominion. Part of the predicament for the world is that it continues to view America in relation to its light when, in fact, America is now much more about power. This is what it means to say that America has become an empire.

At the same time, America must understand that the world is rapidly becoming an integrated system under the impact of economic globalization and the technology of instantaneous communication. In a globalizing world, cultural nuances and social disparities matter far more than military might, and issues of ethnicity and religion go

far deeper than the power of the state. Governance cannot be exercised successfully simply by the application of power. Brute force does not make friends and cannot change a person's mind.

There is increasingly a *civilizational* context for governance that needs to be taken into account. The international community requires leadership that is sensitive to societal and cultural differences as well as to political and economic conditions. It needs leadership that will foster the integrating institutions necessary to bring these complex factors together for the equitable management of the global system. Integrating diversity is only achieved through patience and compromise. It requires honoring all the voices and building consensus within the context of mutual respect and international norms and procedures. Leadership in this context is successful more through influence than by coercion.

This interplay between American power - unsurpassed, militarily oriented, and unilaterally directed, and the needs of an integrating world - highly diverse, culturally conditioned, and requiring compromise in order to effectively govern, is the framework within which the American empire will play out its unique and special destiny during the twenty first century. Both America and the world, for better or for worse, will be shaped by how this is done.

In all probability, the United States will dominate the twenty-first century as Rome dominated the first. The critical question is not *whether* the US will do this but whether it will *acknowledge* that this is what it is doing. Only if it consciously takes up the mantle of leadership will it be able to set forth and implement the coherent series of policies necessary for global stability and prosperity. How the United States comports itself as an imperial republic will determine its own fate as well as the fate of the earth for a long time to come. To the degree to which it exercises its dominion consistent with its founding vision and informed by the lessons it can glean from the experience of other imperial powers, it will endure. It will be remembered as either the architect of the world's first global order or as a tragedy of epic dimensions.

America at its moment of power, the world at its moment of integration: how will they come together? Will the world experience *pax Americana*, the American peace? Or *pox Americana*, the American plague? This is the most fundamental question of our time and the exploration of my forthcoming book *America as Empire: Global Leader or Rogue Imperium?*

June 4th 2003, San Francisco