

The Empire Strikes Back

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Reviewed Here:

American Empire: The Realities and Consequences of US Diplomacy

by Andrew J. Bacevich

Special Providence: American Foreign Policy and How It Changed the World

by Walter Russell Mead

Empire: The Rise and Demise of the British World Order and the Lessons for Global Power

by Niall Ferguson

The Decline of American Power

by Immanuel Wallerstein

The Savage Wars of Peace: Small Wars and the Rise of American Power

by Max Boot

Empire

by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri

A few years in Washington, DC, snake-oil capital of the universe, and you begin to think that anything can be packaged as something else. Well, almost anything. Until I read *Empire*, by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, I would never have believed that a postmodernist paean to Italian anarcho-syndicalism could be presented by its publishers as a defense of "the idealism of the Founders and Abraham Lincoln," and of the universal validity of the US Constitution.

This wonderful joke is the best thing about Hardt and Negri's book, which otherwise is distinguished by a clarity of language and coherence of thought processes that suggest an Italianate *Finnegans Wake*. Its history is often quite fanciful. Its portrait of the liberating work practices of the postmodern industrial proletariat would seem to be drawn from the life of a SoHo fashion designer. Its vision of the improving possibilities of bioengineering as far as the mass of humanity is concerned displays an extraordinary naïveté concerning the realities of wealth and power. As for its vision of a modern world "empire," this is not without interest as a portrait of certain aspects of "globalization," but the authors' attempts to define this picture as an

"empire," and to distinguish "empire" both from "imperialism" and from contemporary American hegemony are strained, to say the least.

It is difficult to resist the conclusion that this curious choice of the word "empire" as a name for these patterns of globalization reflects the new modishness of empire as a subject--as witnessed by the number of books now appearing on this theme. Only a few years ago, to use this word to describe the United States would have branded you automatically as a member of the left. Today, it is being taken up by writers across the spectrum, and with unbridled pride by right-wingers like Max Boot of the *Wall Street Journal*.

But, as Niall Ferguson notes in the conclusion to his vivid and often insightful history of the British Empire, this new open popularity of empire as a self-description in the United States is so far characteristic only of intellectuals. As far as the mass of the American people is concerned, this is still "an empire in denial." And in presenting its imperial plans to the American people, the Bush Administration has been careful to package them as something else: on the one hand, as part of a benevolent strategy of spreading American values of democracy and freedom; on the other, as an essential part of the defense not of an American empire, but of the American nation itself.

This is something that must be stressed if the power and the danger, but also the fragility, of the Bush program are to be understood: The United States under Bush is driving toward empire, but the domestic political fuel being fed into the engine is that of a wounded and vengeful nationalism. This sentiment is for the most part entirely sincere, and all the more dangerous for that. If recent history is any guide, there is probably no more dangerous element in the nationalist mix than a sense of righteous victimhood. Will this fuel continue to be available to the Bush Administration in its drive for empire? Or to put it another way, will the packaging retain its shine? This depends partly on whether the United States comes under further massive attack by Islamist terrorists, but still more on the extent of the sacrifices that ordinary Americans will be called upon to make for the sake of empire.

An unwillingness on the part of the masses to make serious sacrifices for empire is hardly new. As Ferguson points out, until the First World War the British Empire was conquered and run very much on the cheap, and this was true of the other colonial empires as well. The Royal Navy was of course expensive, but then it doubled as the absolutely necessary defense of the British Isles themselves against invasion or blockade. Then as now, given the overwhelming superiority of Western firepower and military organization, enormous territories could be conquered at very low cost and risk. When European empires ran into areas that were truly costly to conquer and hold--the British in Afghanistan, the Italians in Ethiopia--they tended to back off. And in Ferguson's view, the unprecedentedly high rate of casualties among white British troops in the Boer War helped initiate the process of British disillusionment with empire.

This was something of which the general staffs and the conservative establishments of Europe were well aware. Acute students both of Clausewitz and of police reports on the mood of their working classes, they knew the importance of mass support for any serious war, and the limits on how far empire could be used for purposes of mass mobilization. So sensible governments with the ability to do so always used volunteer troops and foreign mercenaries, not conscripts, for colonial wars--the French Foreign Legion, for instance, was created for this explicit purpose.

In his 1983 study *The Conquest of Morocco*, Douglas Porch offers a fascinating description of the various stratagems used by General Lyautey and the other French imperialists to convince a skeptical French public to support this adventure, which many regarded as a costly distraction from the need to strengthen France's defenses against the real national threat, Germany. These ranged from religious appeals to convert Morocco through civilizational arguments about the need to create a modern Moroccan state, to suggestions that because Germany also had designs on Morocco, it was necessary to combat Germany there as well as in the fields of Lorraine.

In their efforts to rally democratic support as a defense against socialism at home, the capitalist elites in Europe before 1914 similarly relied much less on imperialism than on nationalism. And in 1914, the impulse that drove the European masses to support the war and to immolate themselves in it was nationalism, universally expressed in the belief that the homeland itself was in imminent danger of attack. The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, have given the Bush Administration a tremendous opportunity in this regard, one they have exploited to the hilt. For that matter, Bush's election campaign vastly played down his followers' imperial ambitions (remember the call for American "modesty"?) while appealing to "folk values" closely associated with what Walter Russell Mead has dubbed "Jacksonian nationalism," against the alien, European-influenced cultural elitism of Gore and the "East Coast elites."

But nationalism is a notoriously wild horse to let loose. At the time of writing, a critical question hanging over the American empire in the Middle East is whether, for the sake of that empire, Bush will be able to confront an Israeli nationalism that members of his own Administration themselves partly share, and that they have also inflamed and exploited for domestic political ends. If he is not willing to take the domestic political risk of confronting this nationalism (which for many Americans has become deeply entwined with their American nationalism), then his imperial project in the Middle East will become much costlier and more dangerous.

Even Mead, who gives a sympathetic portrait of the Jacksonian nationalist tradition in his splendid new book, also worries about the tendency of its adherents to be carried away by furious emotion, and to switch from contemptuous indifference to the outside world to a spirit of annihilatory ruthlessness if they feel that America has been attacked. As he and others have pointed out, democracies may go to war less willingly than autocracies, but when they do so, they have a tendency to fight with fewer restraints and to aim for total rather than partial victory.

The European nationalist death-ride unleashed in 1914 began by destroying the sons of the old European elites, and by 1945 had destroyed their dominance and in many cases their countries as well. They may have started the war; unlike the coolheaded nineteenth-century imperialists in their overseas campaigns, they were unable to stop it even when it became apparent that its course was disastrous to them and their countries. As Dick Diver puts it in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *Tender Is the Night*, "This was a love battle--there was a century of middle-class love spent here.... All my beautiful lovely safe world blew itself up here with a great gust of high explosive love."

Here lies one clue to the difference between the American imperialism of Clinton and that of Bush, a difference that is real but--like the relationships between nationalism, capitalism and imperialism--is also by no means simple. Clinton packaged American imperialism as globalism, and he was also genuinely motivated by a vision of global order in which America would lead

rather than merely dictate. Bush is not just packaging imperialism as American nationalism; he and his followers are genuinely motivated by nationalism, in a way that Clinton was not, and, as nationalists, they are absolutely contemptuous of any global order involving any formal check whatsoever on American action.

Within the United States, empire as such still needs to be wrapped up. The United States has a tradition of hostility to empire going back to its own revolution against the British and its foundation as an independent state. This hostility therefore became one element in what Samuel Huntington and others have called "the American creed," or national ideology. But as American historians of many different political stripes have pointed out, the language of imperial expansion also dates back to the earliest years of the American Republic, and was not restricted to the North American continent. In the decades before the Civil War, the South in particular bubbled with demands for the annexation of Cuba and even Mexico. Although such thinking exploded in the run-up to the Spanish-American War of 1898, it had been percolating for some time.

In a fascinating new study, Andrew Bacevich, a distinguished soldier-turned-historian, traces the strong continuities from the 1890s in American thought and action since the end of the cold war, above all, the use of the language of civilizational duty (to the spread of democracy, freedom and good government) as a justification for imperial conquest--though except for historical romantics like Boot, the explicit language of the "white man's burden" has been abandoned, even if its spirit remains. Of course, 1898, like 2003, is special, since it was in that year that the United States began to imitate the nineteenth-century European colonial empires and to establish direct imperial rule over foreign possessions. Elsewhere, the United States has generally either annexed those territories whose small populations it could swamp (Hawaii, northern Mexico) or exerted indirect dominance, as in Central America: neocolonialism *avant la lettre*.

When it comes to the exertion of such indirect imperial control, it is possible to draw a rather straight line from the Monroe Doctrine to the Bush Doctrine. Thus Walter Russell Mead argues that US strategy since 1945 has progressively extended tougher and tougher versions of the Monroe Doctrine from Latin America to the entire world. In his view, the moves of Franklin Delano Roosevelt and his successors to dismantle the British and French colonial empires directly echo Monroe's rejection of European empires and spheres of influence in the Americas, while Bush II's doctrine, like Theodore Roosevelt's corollary to the Monroe Doctrine, asserts the universal right of US intervention not only in defense of its own interests but for the sake of the replacement and reordering of "rogue states" and hostile regimes.

Neither Mead nor Bacevich would see much difference in this regard between Bush and Clinton, both of whom, in their view, implemented an American imperial project with deep roots in the very nature of America's state and society. For them, Bush's Iraq is just Clinton's Kosovo or Haiti on a much larger scale and with greatly increased risks. They have a point. Clinton, after all, moved rather quickly to combat Russia's plans to retain a sphere of influence in the territory of the former Soviet Union and was not too scrupulous about the regimes he helped in the process. Clinton preserved NATO as what was then seen as the essential vehicle of US strategic dominance in Europe and, as Bacevich argues, fought the Kosovo war largely in order to justify NATO's continued existence as this vehicle.

This is a view essentially shared by Immanuel Wallerstein and other Marxist historians, though they would of course add that this imperial drive is also implicit in the nature of American capitalism. Is this vision of imperial continuity between the administrations correct? And if so, why the intense nostalgia for the Clinton Administration now felt by so much of the world, especially in Europe? Is this just the lingering after-effect of the old rogue's seductions, a striking case of huge masses of people mistaking form for substance, the packaging for the contents?

Not entirely. In the first place, it must be noted that, to a considerable extent, American power in the world, especially after the disappearance of the only other superpower, has been not only a willed project but also an objective fact, and this is bound to be reflected both in US policies and in the reactions of other countries to the United States. Even if the United States had carried out much deeper cuts in military spending than occurred in the 1990s, the collapse of the Soviet military would still have left the United States far and away the strongest military power on the planet. Moreover, in seeking to understand the direction of US world policy, it is, of course, critically important to analyze the great abstractions: imperialism, capitalism, nationalism. But in doing so, it is also important not to lose sight of the role of chance events (notably 9/11), of personality and of differing political cultures and ideological currents within America.

Or, to put it at its crudest, imperialism, like any other program, can be conducted intelligently or stupidly. One aspect of this is the packaging. *Suaviter in modo, fortiter in re*, said the Romans. "Speak softly and carry a big stick," said Teddy Roosevelt, and, doubtless, similar phrases exist in Chinese and Quechua. But this tactical difference may also reflect a deeper difference of strategy. Drawing a diplomatic veil over the extent of other countries' inferiority to yours in terms of power, and presenting your plans in terms of alliances rather than unilateral action, may also reflect a desire to co-opt rather than conquer, and show a more acute awareness of the actual limitations on your own power. The German and Japanese empires of the twentieth century failed not only because they started late and from an inadequate power base but because they conducted their foreign policies with an incredible degree of savage stupidity.

From this point of view, Clinton may well be justifiably seen by future generations as a particularly intelligent and valuable servant of American imperial capitalism, in a way that went beyond diplomatic cleverness. He seems to have understood three things that the Bush Administration has wholly or partly forgotten: that the American economy is utterly intertwined with the world capitalist order, depends on the health of that order and draws immense benefits from that order. This is indeed likely to be seen by future historians as the central tragic irony of the Bush Administration's world policy: that the United States, which of all states today should feel like a satisfied power, is instead behaving like a revolutionary one, kicking to pieces the hill of which it is king.

Clinton's policy, by contrast, was much more that of a stable hegemon. It was rooted in a recognition that the present age, especially since the collapse of Soviet Communism, has offered the American government unprecedented opportunities when it comes to co-opting the elites of other major states and defusing radical hostility to the United States. As noted above, the notion of "democratic peace" is deeply flawed and ambiguous, historically speaking. It is of especially questionable value in today's world, when so many countries are in fact only shell democracies, in which democratic government acts as a cover for oligarchical rule. Moreover, by far the single

greatest example of successful capitalist economic development, China, is not a democracy and shows few signs of becoming one.

However, what has happened--first in China and then in Russia--is that the political elites of these countries have become massive property-holders, and this in turn has given them a massive stake in the stability of the international capitalist system, and hence in the avoidance of major war. It may be argued, of course, that this was also true of the European elites of 1914. But unlike their predecessors, the elites of today do not come trailing a heritage of military aristocracy led by military monarchy; and the masses over which they are ruling, like those of the West over the past century, have been largely demilitarized by socioeconomic change and urbanization. So while the notion of a "democratic peace" may be overblown, that of a "capitalist peace" seems valid--as long as the United States does not so infuriate and humiliate the rulers of other major countries as to lead them to forget their own best interests. It may be, however, that their fears in this regard are exaggerated, and that as far as the threat from the United States is concerned they just have to sit it out for ten or twenty years, until a majority of Americans decide that empire is just not worth the cost.

What Clinton--like Eisenhower--also realized is that the expansion of raw, direct American power in the world depends on and is also limited by the need to maintain the health of the US economy, and through this the economic well-being and hence the long-term political support of the majority of the American people. For the US imperial project suffers from three main underlying weaknesses. The first is the new threat to the American mainland from terrorism using weapons of mass destruction. In the short term, this, as I have suggested, can even strengthen US imperialism by adding the fuel of national vengeance; but if, God forbid, terrorists ever gain the ability to strike such heavy blows that they seriously damage the US economy, then American power will also be weakened.

The second weakness is lack of military resources. This may sound absurd, given the fact that America is now spending nearly as much on the military as the rest of the world put together. If one looks at the actual numbers of US troops, however, a rather different picture begins to emerge. For if the United States spends much more than anyone else on its troops, its troops are also much more expensive to maintain than those of most other countries, and more costly than the "scum of the earth" who staffed the colonial armies of the nineteenth century. It does not have very many of them, and a very high proportion of them are now tied down for the foreseeable future patrolling Iraq. It may be, therefore, as many US officials say in private, that the Bush Doctrine was a "doctrine for one case only"--namely Iraq; and that a planned war to invade and occupy Iran or North Korea is inconceivable. That doesn't necessarily mean that such wars won't happen, but that they will be the accidental rather than the deliberate results of Bush Administration policies.

This brings me back to the third weakness: the willingness of American citizens, particularly among the elites, to make sacrifices for the sake of empire. For one thing is gradually becoming clear: Given its immense wealth, the United States can afford a military capable of dominating the earth; or it can afford a stable, secure system of social and medical entitlements for a majority of its aging population; or it can afford massive tax cuts for its wealthiest citizens and no tax raises for the rest. But it cannot afford all three, unless it can indefinitely sustain them through a

combination of massive trade deficits and international borrowing. This seems most unlikely, especially in the midst of a global economic downturn.

It is quite true, as the radical imperialists argue, that in the 1950s the United States sustained far higher levels of military spending as a proportion of the budget and GDP, but at that time, the rest of government spending was considerably lower, and the United States was in the midst of an era of very steep economic growth lasting three decades. Unless today's US and world economies can return to such growth--not for years but for decades--then something is sooner or later going to break, and break disastrously, if the Bush Administration continues its present policies. Such a disaster, however, would engulf not only the American empire but the lives and hopes of countless Americans, the stability and growth of the present world economic system, and possibly even the US political order. And this would be the ultimate American tragedy, for it is above all the mixture of economic opportunity and the US Constitution that are the bedrock of America's moral and ideological power in the world today, and will be America's chief legacy to future ages of the world.

It is interesting in the light of all this to revisit the work of Immanuel Wallerstein. The title of his new book, *The Decline of American Power*, appears curious at first sight. So regularly has Wallerstein predicted the decline of American power over the decades, and so steeply has American power in fact risen, that he has often appeared as the boy who cried wolf. But then, in the fable, the wolf, of course, eventually turned out to be all too real, just a bit late. And even if one finds Wallerstein's model of the world system too schematic and undifferentiated, he is still worth reading for the tremendous breadth of his scholarship and the fecundity of his insights.

Among these is his grasp of the essentially insatiable nature of capitalism--or at least of American capitalism, for one criticism that might be made of Wallerstein is his relative indifference to the importance of different national cultures in capitalism. Anyone who doubts their importance even when it comes to economic policy might want to contrast the two great newspapers of the Western capitalist classes, the *Wall Street Journal* and the *Financial Times*, and note the horrified incredulity with which *FT* writers have attacked the Bush Administration's tax cuts, so ardently demanded by the editorial page of the *Journal*.

For just as US imperialism, emboldened by a strong shot of nationalism, is busy undermining the world political order of which the United States is hegemon, so dominant sections of the US capitalist elite are suicidally gobbling up the fiscal foundations of American economic stability and the American capitalist system. Their pathological hatred of FDR, who did more than any other man in the twentieth century to preserve and extend American capitalism, has been echoed in our own day by their visceral, hysterical loathing of Clinton, who, objectively speaking, also served them very well. This is a truly strange and awful sight, and--*pace* Niall Ferguson--one that bears little resemblance to the behavior of the old British imperial elites, at least once their empire had been achieved. In their criminal arrogance, these contemporary American projects and attitudes are much more reminiscent of Wilhelmine Germany, and we must hope that they do not receive a condign punishment. For in the words of Arnold Toynbee, "great empires do not die by murder, but suicide."