An American Empire?
Implications for Democracy, Order and Disorder in World Politics*

1. Dialectics of Empire

Is it now America’s turn at that international preeminence we call empire? If empires can be “evil,” can they also be benevolent? Can they be run on democratic principles? What relationship to global violence or “disorder” does the state structure known as “empire” have? Can states that strive for peace generate conflict and hatred?

Recall the most famous literary apologia for empire: Virgil’s prophecy of the Pax Romana:

Roman, remember by your strength to rule
Earth’s peoples – for your arts are to be there
To pacify, to impose the rule of law,
To spare the conquered, battle down the proud.¹

But contrast J. M. Coetzee’s melancholy allegory of a minor official confronting the encroaching tribes at a remote imperial outpost:

Empire has created the time of history. Empire has located its existence not in the smooth recurrent spinning time of the cycle of the seasons but in the jagged time of rise and fall, of beginning, and end, of catastrophe. Empire dooms itself to live in history and plot against history. One thought alone preoccupies the submerged mind of Empire: how not to die, how to prolong its era. By day it pursues its enemies. It is cunning and ruthless, it send its bloodhounds everywhere. By night it feeds on images of disaster: the sack of cities, the rape of populations, pyramids of bones, acres of desolation. A mad vision yet a virulent one….²

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¹ This paper is based on earlier versions: “An American Empire?” Harvard Magazine, November 2002;
The *Pax Romana* or a perpetual war for an unattainable security: These two images of empire, I propose, are both correct. Empires impose political order, but they also generate international disorder. They suppress violence and they provoke it, in a dialectical effect that has operated throughout history and remains crucial today.

The study of empire, after all, is not just of historical interest. Americans, I think, and certainly British observers (or would-be mentors) of United States policies, increasingly sense that the structure and aspirations of empire are relevant to our own country’s choices in contemporary international politics.\(^3\) The Bush Administration enunciated an ambitious security policy in mid-September 2002, which declared that the United States must retain an overwhelming military preponderance and be prepared to intervene -- unilaterally if need be and preemptively if danger was imminent -- on behalf of democratic values, human rights, and its own security anywhere in the world.\(^4\) Is such a sweeping declaration, based on so confident a belief in American power, imperial? And – to pose the first question taken up here -- is America an empire? The answer depends, naturally enough, on how we wish to define empire. Part of this essay thus is an effort to examine the traits that empires have had in the past and to ask to what degrees they characterize the United States today. But if then as historians and political analysts we think it useful to think of contemporary America as an empire, the further question arises: what consequences are likely to follow? In specific, what are the implications of empire for international politics, whether in the remote past or the contemporary era? Is there any determinate relationship of empire to the conditions of peace and war in international politics?

Certainly there have been wars without the ambitions of empire, and there have been eras of peace without the pacifying hand of the legions. The twentieth century has been one of such extraordinary violence and bloodshed that untangling the causal factors is extremely difficult and often uncertain. Even if we attempt to tally just the casualties of organized conflicts between states or between states and groups that aspire to statehood – that is, if we leave aside the masses killed in the Holocaust or Stalinist famines, purges and repression, or the millions who perished in Mao’s China or Pol Pot’s
Cambodia – the twentieth-century body count probably climbs up toward one hundred million. Historians of warfare and of past atrocities and observers of contemporary ones repeatedly search for the causes of this violence; and of course there are many, and their relative importance remains contested. Differences of race, class, faith and the grievances accumulated by history – so called ancient hatreds -- all play a role. But the same groups that can suddenly erupt and murder their neighbors usually live side by side for long periods and can even intermarry. It takes a political framework to transform possible frictions into licensed slaughter, to allow private parties to satisfy their rancor by violence and murder, to remove the normal restraints that usually keep “ordinary men” from being ordinary murderers, just as it takes a political framework to encourage ordinary men to kill rival soldiers.

But what political framework? Most historical and sociological analyses make a special claim for the role of states in the production of violence. That is, they ascribe particular responsibility to the territorial communities in the international system that claim sovereignty and have the resources to use force to suppress internal disorder and defend their autonomy. From Max Weber to Michael Mann and Anthony Giddens, sociologists have identified violence with the emergence of states, and, as emphasized by Charles Tilly, suggested that state formation has resulted from international violence. Recently in the American Historical Review, Mark Mazower has also valuably pointed out that large-scale murder, ethnic cleansing, mayhem and rape follow from state weakness and not just state power. Still, historians have emphasized the role of the state for a long time now –at least since the influential Prussian-German historians of the nineteenth-century effectively founded the university-based profession as a study of state power. Nonetheless, “the state” as such is too generic an ideal type really to be very helpful in analyzing particular constellations of international relations. Political scientists, above all, have sought to correlate types of state with their proclivity for war. Democracies, it is claimed since Immanuel Kant and Woodrow Wilson, actually work to restrain violence. Today’s pundits have invented a category, so-called “rogue states” (hardly a scientific category, since rogue states are defined only by their alleged policies) that allegedly work to build weapons of mass destruction, may resort to terrorism, and in
general, foment violence. The issue here, however, is more specific: whether empires in recent history have played a particular role that states more generally defined have not. In what ways might empire – including the aspirations to achieve empire and the policies required to enforce its rule – make a special contribution either to “order” or “disorder” (to use the language of those running the empire), to domination or to resistance (to use the terms of those contesting empire), or to peace and war, civil harmony or mass violence. This is not an easy question, and its answer will never escape the historian’s political stance, but perhaps this paper can at least clarify the inquiry.

2. Constituting Empire

For the first time since the early twentieth century it has become acceptable to ask whether the United States has become or is becoming an empire in some classic sense. Application of the term “empire” to the United States used to provoke anger and skepticism, even when presented under such notions as “empire by invitation.” Critics advance two particular objections. First, they point out that the United States has coveted no territorial acquisitions (although they exempt American expansion across the continent from this generalization, and they don’t seem to count the Pacific and Caribbean possessions acquired between 1898 and 1945). They point out that the United States has not engaged in a program of conquest abroad and relinquished the Philippines after a half century. Rome and Britain conquered; America has emancipated. Obviously the process of acquiring imperial influence has been different in the American from the Roman case – although not so different from the alliance structure that historians term the Athenian “empire.”

If we consider the structure of empire and not the process of acquisition, then I believe that the United States has qualified in many respects since the onset of the Cold War, even if it remained an empire that dared not speak its name. Empires are a particular form of state organization in which the elites of differing ethnic or ethno-national units accept a common set of ideological values and whether out of constraint, convenience, or conviction defer to the values of those who govern the dominant center or metropole. An empire can be built on a congeries of client states and need not rest on total subjugation and direct rule. Even when imperial authorities remain formally
sovereign over the lands they count as possessions, they often allow for varying degrees of internal autonomy.

In a discussion of an earlier version of this paper, the distinguished historian Paul Schroeder dissented from this judgment and sharply separated “hegemony,” or a preponderant but accepted leadership, from empire. The term remains provocative. There is perhaps a test to discriminate between a de facto empire and the exercise of hegemony. Within an empire any effort to defect from the obligations of association by a smaller ethnonational unit is usually punished severely. Empires have tough cops and not just nice cops, if they have the latter at all. Recall the fate of Melos at the hands of Athens in the Peloponnesian War, or Hungary at the hands of the Soviets in 1956. Not every defector can be successfully punished: the Spanish fought eighty years to subjugate Dutch dissent but ultimately failed. The United States used force -- covert or overt -- to halt defection of outlying but strategically or economically important states: in Iran in 1953, Guatemala in 1954 -- but failed in Cuba in 1961. More tellingly, Washington has had to accept or chosen to accept major dissent from core allies, most notably when France left the NATO command structure in the 1960s and has led opposition to American Iraqi policy today. Hence the American structure of ascendancy lies perhaps in a gray area as measured by traditional forms. The United States has created a two-zone structure of hegemonic preponderance: requiring consensual acquiescence and common elite interests among its principal Cold War partners but less constrained with respect to clients on the periphery. Whether we would have the will or stomach to enforce consent against the will of our allies remains to be seen.

Of course, most units within an imperial structure shun a costly defiance and if they feel the need for special rations of security, material aid, or just reassurance of status, they seek what they believe is a “special relationship,” that is, the expectation that they can count on particular access or influence in the imperial capital. The British have built an entire postwar foreign policy on their own belief that they really do enjoy a special relationship based on Oxford hospitality and a willingness to commit manpower to common military efforts. Until last fall’s elections, the Germans compulsively
burnished their special role as repentant and faithful political offspring. Israel has depended on a special relationship that its leadership in Jerusalem and its friends in Washington must always deny. Sometimes as in the case of the Athenians within the Roman Empire or the British with respect to the United States since World War II, the countries priding themselves on a special relationship may believe they actually set the policy agenda. More generally within an empire, distinct national communities may be harshly controlled, or they may enjoy extensive autonomy. In either case, some of their leaders usually mingle with the imperial rulers and reject any effort to escape their influence. Others may organize resistance, but often borrow from their rulers’ own system of values and institutional prestige: the anticolonial leaders of the twentieth century often learned the doctrines of resistance in their rulers’ universities and cafes.¹⁰

Empires rule by virtue of the prestige they radiate as well as by their military might. Indeed they are likely to collapse of they have to resort to force alone. They must provide public goods of diverse sorts. Artistic styles, a hegemonic language, consumer preferences and tastes, flow outward with power and investment capital. Empires have justified their supra-ethnic domination by invoking allegedly universal values or cultural supremacy, and have diffused these public goods by cultural diplomacy and exchanges.¹¹ Empires claim a universalistic or grandiose normative mission – often religious, but sometimes secular. Roman Christianity, Greek Christianity, Islam, Marxism, economic growth, market democracies and human rights have all served as universal claims. Even if empires originate in a concept of shared kinship descent, whether as Trojans transplanted to Italy or sons of Osman, or Mongol clans, they add far more encompassing values: Roman law and citizenship, defense of the true faith, Christian, later Catholic, or Muslim. In modern times they substitute secular aspirations, a belief in education, economic progress and modernization, in the historical role of the working classes, most recently, an appeal to encompassing human rights. Imperial rule, John Seeley wrote, and he was no unthinking celebrant, devolved on Britain in Asia the responsibility that Rome had fulfilled in Europe, “the greatest function which any Government can ever be called upon to discharge.”¹²
Although a sense of shared ethnicity, descent, or historical tribulations can provide an “inner” ideology to unify a ruling group, empires cannot create an empire-wide consensus around collective national rights per se. Indeed national loyalties usually emerge in opposition to the universalistic imperial project. Within an empire nations are defiant as well as imagined communities. (Urban and provincial loyalties lead to a more ambiguous stance. If the Empire granted scope for local magnates to rule in their home territory, they might enroll voluntarily in the wider imperial framework. Otherwise they could also resist.) National appeals have enjoyed success as a principle of state formation primarily when rival imperial projects tended to stalemate each other, as in the last third of the eighteenth century, or the era from 1905 to 1950.

The ideology of empire claims an equality that all subjects, even the most humble, can share – whether the promise of salvation or of a universal legal order and citizenship. Nonetheless, empire cannot be maintained by benevolence alone. Nor just by enhanced economic welfare for those inside the frontiers. Even if there are no outright conquests, empires rest on a decisive margin of power, military power if need be – and power that can be deployed against reluctant clients as well as threats from outside. The inequality of power, resources and influence, and the willingness to mobilize it against defectors distinguishes an empire from an alliance system, although treaties of alliance may disguise or lead to empire. In his brilliant analysis of a generation ago, the Berkeley sinologist Franz Schurmann pointed out that when a nation becomes an empire it creates “a realm of ideology “centering on a powerful executive who controls decisive military force.” Imperium enhances the executive in peacetime and not merely in time of war.

Empires must maintain a decisive edge of military and/or economic resources, as Paul Kennedy and others have pointed out in the case of the contemporary United States. Although Kennedy considered this beyond America’s collective will a decade ago, he now concedes we are likely to maintain decisive supremacy for a long time. Where a nuclear arsenal alone used to provide that decisive edge, with the partial diffusion of atomic weapons and the manifold restraints on using them, American supremacy rests today more on electronic weapons guidance and the capacity to project power long
distance. Empires may themselves be deterred by economic and financial costs -- the Romans kept their military strength relatively steady after Augustus\textsuperscript{15} -- and they may not have developed successful strategies against either guerrilla warfare in remote areas or terror at home. Still, they must be prepared to punish, to torture suspects under some conditions, and even to resort to terror against populations. As Cleon warned the Athenians when they confronted the rebellious city-state of Mitylene, “the three failings most fatal to empire” were “pity, sentiment, and indulgence.” Liberal imperialists will always deplore Schrecklichkeit as aberrant and counter-productive -- consider the parliamentary debate over General Dyer’s rampage at Amritsar in 1919 or the French discussions over torture in Algeria in the 1950s -- but the soldiers assigned the dirty work know that it is necessary even at the price of their later disavowal and disgrace. Ultimately a mix of secrecy or “deniability” must be developed if leaders are not prepared to renounce the imperial project. Hypocrisy is the tribute imperialism pays to democracy.\textsuperscript{16}

All states turn from time to time to military men for political and diplomatic leadership; and in many emerging states, whether in Japan, Latin America, modern Africa, they have exercised decisive power. Empires, however, rely on their military for a particular role in governance abroad, above all during the years that imperial governance is consolidated: witness Lugard, Lyautey, Lucius Clay among others. Provinces on the frontier may after a while be granted local assemblies with considerable power for local legislation. But the proconsul, the occupying authority, the great captain is decisive. If he challenges the policy makers in the capital, as for example Douglas MacArthur did in 1950-51, or the French generals attempted in Algeria in 1958 and in 1961, major crisis ensues. Similarly, most states generate ruling groups, but empire in particular is about the cooperation of elites. Ideology will stress the universal values across class lines – “The Senate and the People of Rome,” – and indeed modern democratic empires have retained a decisive role for electoral tests (as well as for judicial decisions). Nonetheless, the scope of decision-making on the part of elected representatives narrows, elections become more and more plebiscitary, wealth and inheritance play a greater role in renewing a governing class.\textsuperscript{17} Inequality increases, even
if the general income of common people increases. The successful empire inculcates a popular fascination with its elites among those who can never really count on joining them. Gazing at the lifestyles of the rich and famous becomes compelling. Sports become gladiatorial and highly rewarded. Society wearies of thinking about those below the poverty line; it becomes more fascinated by those who occupy places above the affluence line. Middle-class participants become upper-class wannabes: airline “upgrades” from economy to business class become a pervasive social aspiration, casinos and lotteries substitute for social policy.

Because of their structure as conglomerates of territory, empires tend to establish a particular territorial regime. They can remain comfortable with large areas or strong city states that retain differential amounts of autonomy; they do not insist on the permeated homogeneous territory (or religion and language), that Jacobin nationalists have. Suzerainty is more important than some rigorous sovereignty, which in fact developed as a concept as the Habsburg Central European Empire was dissolving. Empires thus tend to be spongy assemblages – the Habsburg realms were exemplary in this regard -- but highly concerned about their imperial frontier.

Empires rise and fall throughout recorded history and, of course, they are each unique. But certain eras are particularly characterized by the spread and sometimes the contention of these great state units. Consider the first two centuries of the Common Era, dominated by the Romans and the Han at opposite ends of the northern temperate zones; then the period from about 1250 to1650, when first the Mongols and their successors, then Mughal and Chinese, Ottomans and Habsburgs and Inca and Aztecs all became sucked into the vortex of world politics; thereafter, the rivalry for overseas wealth and domination – silver, slaves, and sugar – that characterized the late eighteenth century in which the British prospered at the cost of French and Spanish wealth. By the late nineteenth century world politics was characterized by two concurrent strategies for large-scale, imperial organization. The ancient dynastic states – Austria-Hungary, Russia, the Ottoman Empire, China -- represented massive efforts to govern neighboring populations that had been added by territorial agglutination, that is by military or dynastic
absorption of contiguous territory. The seaborne empires – Portuguese and Spanish, British, French, Dutch, and eventually American and Japanese – were structures of rule developed to control strategic and economic assets in territories separated physically from their home base or metropole.\textsuperscript{18} In both sorts of empire, indigenous populations that inhabited acquired territories were sometimes dispersed or sometimes subjugated by force. If they were already organized in a long-functioning state, they might be simply incorporated in the larger unit as a territorial dependency, the British Raj being the preeminent example, or they might even remain independent outside of a tributary acknowledgment of nominal subordination.\textsuperscript{19}

Between the world wars, an unstable mix of principles undermined international stability. Within Europe and the framework of the League of Nations the major international powers ostensibly sought to let national self-determination, riddled as it might be by minority claims, prevail.\textsuperscript{20} This was the legacy of Woodrow Wilson’s vision of self-determination. At the same time, however, the victors of the First World War sought to enlarge and exploit their own imperial ascendancy overseas. Indeed, I would propose that the brief success of stabilization in the 1920s – the Locarno order in Europe, the Washington Treaty arrangements in the Pacific, the ability to prolong control in the Islamic world from North Africa to the Indies – rested on the great powers’ ability, brief as it was, to balance the nationalist aspirations aroused by Wilsonianism with reinvigorated imperial condominiums (what the French termed “valorisation de l’empire”). But the world depression and a new impatient generation of colonial students, labor leaders, religious brotherhoods, or nationalist officers, who all challenged the acquiescence consented to by the older members of “mandate” elites demonstrated how fragile this arrangement was by the mid-1930s.\textsuperscript{21}

The colonial powers faced not only restive independence movements within their own domains. By the thirties, too, candidates for what might be called \textit{counter-empire} invoked less encompassing but more embattled communities. Germans and Japanese mixed racialist claims with a crusade against pre-existing exploitative empires. The Japanese sought parity with western colonial empires in the Western Pacific and offered a
vision of a joint Asian crusade that they would lead. Simultaneously, however, they held a notion of national/racial superiority that undermined their other message. The Germans began by claiming parity against Britain, but between the wars added an ideology of racial superiority against the racial and ideological stew in Eastern Europe. Yet even had Germany, Japan, and Italy not decided to challenge the British and French and eventually the American victors of World War I, world politics would have descended into endemic disorder and the crumbling of colonialism, much as characterized the 1960s and 1970s.

In any case, the result of the Second World War was the exhaustion of older empires and the triumph of two states with their own supranational agendas. Each claimed to represent a new set of values that could reconcile supranational coalitions and national self-determination. The fact that one of these powers, the Soviet Union, repeatedly had to use force at the borders of its territorial control – in East Berlin, in Budapest, in Prague, and in Kabul – makes the term “Soviet empire” relatively non-controversial. So, too, Moscow’s rulers’ reliance on the mechanisms of the one-party state and arbitrary police power at home. But the fact that the coalition of countries led by the United States was based upon opposed principles of electoral competition, freedom of expression and mixed economies does not mean that the U.S. role was not devoid of imperial characteristics: the rallying of elites, the armed struggles in the periphery, the appeal of its ideology and aspects of its culture, the decisive margin of force within its own sphere, and the confidence in universal values. “We Americans can boast that we are not as other men are,” wrote the editors of the *Saturday Evening Post* at the end of World War II. As the young journalist Theodore White later recalled, “A sense of the American purpose as Triumph over Evil became unshakable in me, almost maniacal, as I began to flick around the map of Asia which was opening to our conquests.” Whether as hegemon or empire, the leader of a coalition must provide a net positive balance of public goods: the security and prosperity and freedom it generates and enhances must outweigh the payments it extracts, whether these take the form of material tribute or political compliance. Even when it extracted economic rents from abroad by virtue of its continued deficit on current account, the overall balance of goods
America provided seemed positive so long as Soviet power threatened. Once the dangers that the United States took the lead in averting collapsed, the calculus was bound to be recalibrated. Just as significant, American sense of restraint and limits was also bound to evolve.

The aspirations of empires have been crucial throughout the last century, not just for us, but for vast numbers of the world’s population. It is not just the “tragic” condition of multiple sovereignties, not just the nature of the international order as an “anarchical society” that has been responsible for war and violence, but the circumstance that imperial systems produce particular patterns of peace and conflict, order and disorder, as will be discussed below. The student of international history can expect certain characteristic forms of international politics from empires. Moreover, these international outcomes are closely related to particular domestic institutional arrangements. Empire is a condition of world politics, but also a form of domestic politics. These are old propositions, but they come with renewed relevance.

3. Inside and Outside: Frontiers external and internal

The universal claims of empire always encounter a limit, that is, the frontier where the imperium ends and barbarism (or other empires) begin. Frontiers, I believe, are the fundamental institution of empire – both internally and externally. The critical effort of imperial systems is to separate an encompassing realm of law, religion, or secular ideological values that simultaneously groups a vast number of citizens within, but excludes those without. Empires make universalistic claims, but envisage themselves as continually embattled by those who do not accept these claims. The imperial frontier is different from the nation-state frontier developed after the Peace of Westphalia and its successors. The latter divides two states of roughly equal development: it separates states, and after the Peace of Westphalia and then of the Pyrenees, it is often fortified and equipped with crossing points. Sometimes empires abut each other and reach an unstable agreement on a state frontier – not without recurring efforts to conquer beyond what was earlier agreed to. Spanish Habsburgs confronted the Ottomans in North Africa; Austrian Habsburgs confronted the Turk in southeastern Europe, Germany and the Soviet Union
came to a brief agreement in August 1939. At these dividing lines the frontier is administered and treated as a Westphalian or state frontier.

But more typically the imperial frontier does not divide equals, but unequals: insiders and outsiders, citizen or subjects within from “barbarians” without. Recent works on empire—ranging from studies of Rome, to the American Midwest—emphasize that the frontier is not an absolute line (although there may be defensive walls), but a “zone” of exchange. “Barbarians” can and do enter the empire; they are often recruited for their defense capacity or in modern times their labor, whether as industrial workers, as gardeners and house-cleaners, as hospital orderlies, and increasingly as skilled scientists and physicians. Still, the empire seeks to control the free flow of outsiders, whether on the Rhine and Danube, or the Rio Grande. Distinctions of rights to residence or citizenship within the imperial space are increasingly extended. So, too, Westphalian frontiers become less and less important, but the glacis or gradient between insider and barbarian remains crucial. In this sense, too, although the European Union is not an empire, the Schengen Treaty framework enforces the glacis between civilization and the great outside. The passport lines at European Union airports provide Americans with their own small taste of being outsiders. Empires are always waiting for the barbarians with a mixture of need, fascination, and fear. But the poet Cavafis’s premonition that they might not arrive seems misplaced: empires understand how to create their own barbarians. That is what empires do.

Frontiers are important not only at the geographic edge of empire, but inside as well: “The imperial frontier can be shown to lie within each city and town as well as in the countryside,” observes Lynette Russell, the editor of a recent collection on colonial frontiers.” She refers to the “mosaic” patterns of settlement and property in colonial cities and the metropole. Every time one steps into a taxi in Washington, New York, or Boston, one descends into that frontier zone. I would, however, propose the metaphor of a fractal, rather than a mosaic frontier: the lines of confrontation at the far boundaries are replicated on smaller and smaller levels within.
In any case, spatial divisions, no matter how complex, are only half the story. Empires also reconfigure social boundaries and gradients. They do not make them more hierarchical or rigid than under, say, the European ancien regimes. But they certainly relocate social boundaries and prioritize new elites after earlier democratic agendas exhaust their citizenries. The social distinction that preoccupies citizens in the contemporary United States is no longer the one that it did under the politics of redistribution two decades ago, which focused public attention on the least fortunate. Today, as in other empires, society mobilizes private energies to enter gated communities of status defined by the scarce positional good – whether represented by the Ivy League or the exclusive nursery school, the airlines’ Executive Club, the corporate Sky Box, the opera patrons’ lounge, or the circle of platinum credit card holders, and all the other simulacra of success. Distinction is commodified, thus democratized, but simultaneously reaffirmed. Empires can and do provide increasing welfare for the less well-off in the home society. They can advance the democratization (or vulgarization) of taste and access to basic education. But simultaneously they sharpen differentials of prestige, exclusivity, and wealth. No matter what absolute increases in educational opportunity or income accrue to the mass of population at home or the subjects abroad (this is debated in any case), relative stratification seems to increase, or at least hold its own. Empires reward those who run them with goods, honor, and celebrity or media status. And for all the disclaimers about the burdens of empire, few who get the chance to share these rewards disdain them or feel that they require too much effort. Empires are about elites: their recruitment, their privileges, their shared rituals of self-validation whether at the right clubs or Hilton Head weekends, Ditchley conferences, or Davos summits.

Modern imperial structures mitigate their inequality at home through a two-level management of public life. At one level is a serious effort to debate issues of distribution, environment, infrastructure, and development. This debate is carried on among communities of experts in think-tanks, NGOs and schools of public policy whose decisions must sometimes be ratified by a court or a legislature. Participants in these discussions think of them as Habermasian “conversations” among qualified experts and credentialed commentators. They are usually convinced that these conversations
represent an adequate and real form of democracy; and as in the European Union they fret about the impact of plebiscitary democracy on the rationality of the process. They denigrate those who are less convinced of the value of the experts as populists (which they often are) or paranoids (which they occasionally are). Are these trends not intrinsic to all modern democracies? it will be objected. My response – admittedly still tentative – is that in a situation where one state assumes a quasi-imperial ascendancy these developments will be pushed further and faster. For governance is no longer carried on just within individual states, but in a confederation united in a self-contradictory effort to reconcile hierarchy and equality.

The key to such an effort thus has to remain ritualistic and performative, and thus empires also operate on a second, theatrical, level. All politics involves some public performance, but empires emphasize the dramaturgic. Much of the function of a imperial military establishment – Japanese and Austro-Hungarian ceremonials spring to mind -- is the ritualistic stress on continuity and hierarchy: All societies may celebrate prowess, but from the Coliseum to the Super Bowl, in the West at least, empires rely on the sports of the amphitheater that reward star players with fame and fortune. They nurture a culture of spectatorship to create rituals of shared experience. Not accidentally did the movie “Gladiator” strike a responsive chord.

Because of the frontier, the important issues of imperial politics revolve around questions of inclusion and exclusion. For much of the last century, in the West at least, politics was about the distribution of wealth as well as power. The continuing debates and conflicts remained income for farmers, the relative claims of capital and labor to the national product, the share for pensioners, the creation and costs of the welfare state. All these particularly preoccupied developed societies from the 1930s through the 1980s, sometimes to the point of civil war and dictatorship. It was presumed that the social classes and interest groups that contended were stable national entities: not their citizenship, but their entitlements and political influence were at stake. But today’s major issues have become precisely questions of citizenship, residence and belonging. Who can enter the frontiers and claim citizenship? Who will be inside and who outside our
communities of redistribution? The Germans, the Americans, the European Union as a whole have all had major policy debates over these issues during the last decade. Who is entitled to employment, welfare entitlements, and local suffrage? Who can claim under modern conditions what St. Paul did to protect his own rights, **Civis romanum sum**?

Issues of inclusion and borders are not restricted to empires; they have become endemic because of the evolving functions of territory for contemporary states. But this development has also been critical for the American assumption of international dominance. Empires have traditionally been territorially ambitious. They want control and often outright annexation. The high-water mark of outright take-over came between 1880 and 1945: decades that began with the “scramble” for Africa and the simultaneous absorption of territory in Southeast Asia, the Japanese and later German annexations (and Soviet re-annexations) of the first half of the twentieth century. The novelty of the American ascendancy to date may be its partial liberation from the resources of territoriality; indeed, one reason that the nature of American hegemony is hard to pin down is that the United States represents in part a post-territorial empire. If it can assure congenial political and economic ground rules, it need not control geopolitical space. To a degree, the British “imperialism of free trade” during the middle third of the nineteenth century similarly sought advantages without territorial control. However, the British quest to control its strategic and economic environment pushed it toward a more encompassing and ultimately territorially based control. The Indian Mutiny of 1857 undermined the assumptions of an economic administration abstracted from the dominion of territory. For contemporary American ambitions it appears that resources of culture and economics (Joe Nye’s “soft power”) – not alone, however, but coupled with the unmatched capacity to project power to detached sites of battle – have sufficed to ensure mastery. But 9/11 may be our analogue of the Indian Mutiny and whether these assets will suffice to provide security without at least some exemplary territorial administration, such as an Iraqi occupation, is still an open issue.

It will be rightly asked: how does the concept of a frontier function when areas controlled are physically separated from each other or from the metropole. An imperial
frontier, though, need not enclose a continuous space: it delimits a region of supremacy. The frontier in Asia or Central America has been, in effect, a latent or potential boundary, a “virtual” limes: the testing ground of control. The border emerges precisely where it is tested. From 1950 to 1953 the United States fought a substantial war in Korea; in 1954 the United States almost went to war with Communist China for the defense of two offshore islands, Quemoy and Matsu; in 1958 it sent troops onto the beaches of Beirut; in 1983, it dispatched marines to the island of Grenada, in 1990-91, it expelled an invader from Kuwait. And from the logic of maintaining a geographically ambitious leadership and reassuring its allies, rightly so: imperial domains have to be maintained at the periphery of far-flung influence, even when there is no continuous territory. And it is more efficient to maintain them by making examples of isolated spots along the virtual limes then having to contest far greater territories within a periphery.

4. Peace and Violence

We return finally to the issue of order and disorder, violence and war. Empire, I believe, is productive of both order and disorder, Virgil’s summons and Coetzee’s realization. Empires provide public goods that people really want, including an end to endemic warfare and murderous ethnic or religious conflicts. But empires also generate resistance or disorder, and much of the violence of the second half of the century can be ascribed to the order empires can no longer enforce. We can separate this disorder into two phases. The first is that created by clashes with rebels at the frontier while imperial rule is still in force. Whether this violence should be conceived of as “disorder” and “chaos” or as “resistance” will depend upon one’s perspective. (Although they shared a Nobel Prize, Henry Kissinger and Le Duc Tho saw different historical universes. So did Darth Vader and Luke Skywalker to take the most popular American allegory of Empire.) Empires also bequeath a second phase of disorder for a long time as they withdraw or collapse. “The Warring States Period,” is a recurring historical phenomenon, not just a Chinese dynastic intermezzo. Northern Ireland, the Balkans, the former Palestine, the Indian subcontinent, the East Indies, remain theaters of conflict.
If we reverse the usual historical question which asks, “What causes war?” and inquire instead “What allows for peace?” several general answers compete. Following Immanuel Kant and Woodrow Wilson, many students of international relations have become convinced that democratic states assure an end to war among each other (“Democratic dyads”) by virtue of their liberal constitutions.\(^{30}\) (I believe that this is an incomplete analysis. So-called democratic dyads may not have reason to go to war, but powerful democracies can certainly provoke adversarial coalitions that resort to war, whether Thucydides’ Athens or Girondin France.) So-called “realist” students of international relations emphasize instead the power of mutual deterrence. John Gaddis attributes the long peace of the postwar era in Europe to this factor. But a third possible explanation must surely be the circumstance that throughout the nineteenth century, and again after World War II, imperial systems -- once their frontiers were stabilized in Europe and East Asia-- helped assure a balance of power. In contrast, an international system based on national self-determination -- even when it was complemented by commitments to a League of Nations such as the Paris Peace Conference of 1919 sought to institute -- remained fragile and broke down within two decades.\(^{31}\)

A stable international system in Europe emerged only with the Cold War. Then the Soviet side relied on its communist cadres, and when these were challenged in the streets, it turned to the calculated use of force at the sites mentioned above, Berlin in 1953, Hungary in 1956, Czechoslovakia in 1968. The competing U.S. model of a liberal capitalist international order rested on a combination of democracy and such economic principles as market capitalism and the insistence on factor-productivity guidelines to restrain working-class wage claims. But maintaining the American sphere also required sustained military prowess deterrence at the European frontier, armed intervention along the thirty-eighth parallel in Korea and a long, costly war in Vietnam. American administrations also intervened openly or covertly in Iran in 1953, Guatemala in 1954, unsuccessfully in Cuba in 1961, and indirectly in Afghanistan, Angola and many other contested peripheral sites. It remains an open question whether a major imperial structure can ever work through consensual principles or economic means alone. Melvyn Leffler’s authoritative work on American security concepts after the Second World War
demonstrates that our military authorities at least always harbored an extensive geopolitical appetite for bases.\textsuperscript{32}

But it is precisely the periphery or the frontier or the outlying bastion that becomes the source of violence. Eventually empire-builders may get it right and be able to live within defensive lines, as the Romans did after Trajan, but this stabilization can take decades. Historians of empire point out that colonizing countries were drawn into expansion by the disorder that smolders just beyond the last domain they pacified. The Romans wanted to control territory across the Rhine. Britain found itself moving ineluctably up the Nile after what it believed would be a limited occupation to sort out Egyptian finances in the 1880s.\textsuperscript{33} The U.S. presence in Vietnam embroiled Cambodia. The use of force that stabilizes a precarious peace within a given boundary often upsets a precarious balance among the tribes or weakened states that abut the frontier. The record of progressive and endemic violence just across the frontier raises the question whether their can be successful “nation building” in just one country. After it has occupied and perhaps democratized Mesopotamia to the Tigris and Euphrates, will the United States find the Caspian or Persian Gulf in turmoil?\textsuperscript{34}

If we examine the casualty lists of the twentieth-century, then the mass of deaths for the first half the century took place within Europe as old and new empires (and nations) contended. But an almost equal number have perished since World War II outside Europe often in civil wars (with one side or another sponsored by the great powers). Southeast Asia, the liberated African colonies, areas of Central America, and the Caucuses became in their turn areas of endemic and bloody violence with tremendous human costs. As Mark Mazower has observed about much of Europe’s violence, it has taken place on the fringes, and he cites weak states and elsewhere the history of global colonialism.\textsuperscript{35} Who cannot despair reading the reports from Liberia and Sierra Leone’s civil war, with mutilated children and apparently endless brutality, about the toll in question. The question remains to what degree such spectacles of bloodshed might be attributable to empire, and how much to these societies’ own wellsprings of violence. As Basil Davidson has asked for Africa, “What explains this degradation from the hopes and
freedoms of newly regained independence?” And he attributes the failure of governance to the inappropriateness of the nation-state forms that European rulers tried to graft on to their African domains. Empires generate violence as they are being established and as they are dissolving. In between, for briefer or for longer periods, they can fulfill their Virgilian function. Thus two questions remain: can they fulfill this function long enough to make the agonies of founding and decay worthwhile? And can they fulfill it along principles we find decent and conducive to liberty, legality, and welfare. It is probably unrealistic to expect much equality.

Until recently, I was confident that the American domain was exceptional enough to fulfill Virgil’s injunction. Certainly it kept far nastier imperial contenders from prevailing during World War II and then during the Cold War. In a world of empires the United States, I believed, and perhaps still do, was the least costly and indeed the most benevolent one. But I am less willing to acquit the legacy of empire than I was a decade ago. Of course, one can examine the civil wars in El Salvador, Guatemala, Angola, the Congo, etc. and condemn the literal bloody mindedness, the sanguinary ambitions of ruthless military buccaneers with their recruitment of child soldiers. One can likewise blame ruinous postcolonial policies for driving subsistence agriculture out of business, exposing lands to the encroachment of the desert, and piling up masses in shanty towns. One can look at the demagogic pathology of Dr. Karadzic or Slobodan Milosevic in the Balkans. But is it accident that these continuing theaters of violence fall along the lines where imperial frontiers sought to control their outposts? One does not have to attribute a plot to suck the resources dry from Africa or Central America by neo-colonial manipulations and still worry that net resources are removed from these regions instead of being infused into them. Sometimes in despair, one might imagine a law of the conservation of violence, where mayhem and casualties suppressed by beneficent empire in Europe have to resurface on the frontiers.

Such a simplistic mechanism of hydraulic transmission would be too simple. Still, it seems to me that empire, or at least the formation of empire in a given era and its dissolution in another, has been as productive of violence as it is of stability. And it is as
productive of inequality, centralized decision-making, and stratification as it is of real democracy. It is fashionable these days to let American empire speak its name. Fewer people protest about the usage. Niall Ferguson has enjoined the United States to accept the fact and carry out its imperial mission. Andrew Bacevich has written that, like it or not, America has become Rome and must face up to its new duties. Harold James enjoins us to read Gibbon and to redress our chronic deficits on current account if we hope to emulate Rome rather than Spain. But do Americans really want to be Rome? Perhaps there is an alternative to the harsh summons: either Rome or chaos. For almost half a century American policy makers used their power and resources, at least in part, to help build up international institutions that were to rest on a more genuine collective and multilateral effort at assuring world order with freedom and prosperity. Even if these institutions depended on American power and wealth, they also helped civilize and restrain the United States. The issue then becomes how we Americans behave: whether through the institutions that we helped establish after World War II, or by ourselves, supremely confident in our preponderance of military power. Empires, after all, create their own barbarians at home as well as abroad.

5. The Contemporary Moment

As historians, as citizens -- let me suggest in conclusion -- we are at a special vantage where one era becomes visible against the outlines of another. Since at least the eighteenth century historians and political analysts have chosen between two fundamental views of national power and economic welfare. The framework that most Anglo-American social scientists find congenial was adumbrated by such thinkers of the Scottish Enlightenment as Adam Ferguson, John Millar and Adam Smith although elements are already in John Locke... It envisages that the motive force for society’s development – economic and political – emerges out of the self-organization of society itself: from people living together in relative cooperation, producing goods efficiently by virtue of market mechanisms, forming governments to provide infrastructure, and to solve the game-theoretical issue of enforcing contracts. It emphasizes the role of republican institutions, of decentralized markets, the superseding of feudalism, the slow but certain progress of civility, the abolition of slavery, and perhaps some day even the
elimination of war. The nature of international relations, as Kant pointed out, will emerge out of this benign evolution from the bottom up: sovereignty threatens but is held in check by solidarity. Francis Fukuyama’s “End of History” is only the latest restatement of this optimism.

But there has always been another fundamental analytical approach, older, I believe, and far less optimistic. It ascribes no causal power to a benign civil society or to cooperative human nature. It suggests that the conflictuality among sovereign communities will, in effect, construct the quality of relations within as well as between them. Such a view can be identified with Hobbes, who cited the insecure status of states in the international system as the model for insecure and fearful men in the state of nature. In this view – whether held by Thucydides, Hobbes, Hegel, or Hans Morgenthau -- civil society is shaped from the top down. In fact, rightly speaking there is no independent civil society, or more precisely no autonomous civil society unless based on feudal residues such as the Church: it remains a utopian myth. The economic analyses inherent in this approach similarly insist on neo-mercantilist categories that subsume welfare to power. The pressures of conflictuality produce institutions to impose political “order.” The new word for it, “nation-building” is more revealing than it seems at first hearing.

Which view do we find persuasive? I would suggest that in the wake of 1989 and the sudden collapse of the Communist regimes, hopeful westerners recovered their faith in the former scenario. “Civil society” became the catchword of liberation. Reading Vaclav Havel and Adam Michnik, we celebrated the power of civil society in Eastern Europe and the dissolution of repressive institutions. But that apple-cheeked optimism has since faded. By the end of the 1990s commentators and historians have reverted to the second interpretative structure, and its parameters permit us to contemplate empire without taboos. Empires are structures that impose and preserve order (but generate disorder as well.). Empires, even when created by economic prowess as in the case of the United States and to a degree Great Britain, never abandon the possibility of military action. For better or worse, Citibank, MTV, and Amnesty International are not in the
business of producing international order. Empires are. Our public commentators still believe in the virtue of markets for economic outcomes, but that confidence may falter as well depending upon the course of economic activity. At the beginning of the l990s we applauded as dissidents and ebullient crowds brought an empire down; a dozen years later we rely on American imperial power to prepare for “nation-building.” Now we endeavor to create civil society in the interstices of world politics, in effect, from the top down.

So, too, in effect, United States policy increasingly changes the relevance of the concept of “soft power.” Joe Nye formulated the idea of soft power to contest, at least implicitly, Paul Kennedy’s claim that the United States must lose its relative hegemonic edge in world politics. Even if the U.S. lost a decisive lead in weaponry, he proposed, it would preserve its vast economic and cultural influence. But now our neo-conservative theorists offer soft power to our European allies as a sort of consolation prize that they can enjoy while the United States clearly dominates in the realm of hard power. The point is that most of those who offer soft power to others or who urge that it be conceived of as a European counterpart to American military technology consider soft power to be second-rate power. When push comes to shove, national interests require hard power, as General de Gaulle recognized when he developed atomic weapons and left the NATO command structure forty years ago. Soft power is a viable alternative only when international politics is not driven toward its Hobbesian framework, but remains in a Kantian mode, or when a sovereign state really is confident that no conflict of interest will separate it from alliance with a hegemon.

If we talk of empire we must finally talk of duration. Although empires have often been very brief, those aspiring to empire suggest that they will somehow remain secured against ordinary change and will develop institutions and loyalties that render them secure for decades, centuries, or a millennium. Imperial time is meta-historical. Historians take up this challenge and examine empires for their duration and temporal trajectory. Gibbon was not alone in posing the question of issue of decline and fall. Whereas monarchies are often considered stable forms that last indefinitely,38 republics
and empires are seen even by their celebrants (recall Kipling’s “Recessional”!) as cyclical and vulnerable, subject to decay and corruption. How long will United States supremacy endure? No one can say: Niall Ferguson points out that Americans do not willingly go to settle as colonists (although this may not be as essential as it was for the nineteenth century); many other commentators have suggested that the United States has neither the sense of mission or the fiscal willingness to stick out empiring for the long haul. Can the United States develop an empire without settler or colonists, without a bureaucracy, without an imperial ideology and with its frequent elections in which a quickly disillusioned public can reject ambitious policies? Finally, there are the temptations to corruption and cynicism that come with one-sided power. “In the lives of the emperors” --- the novelist Italo Calvino had the great ruler Kublai Khan reflect about his vast domain -- “there is a moment that follows upon the pride in the unbounded breadth of the territories that we have conquered…This is the desperate moment in which we discover that this empire which seemed to us the sum of all wonders is a defeat without end or form, that the rot is already too gangrenous for our scepter to be able to repair it, that our triumph over our enemy sovereigns has made us heirs to their long ruination.” Of course, ruination may take a long while -- but it, too, is a possibility.
NOTES

1 Aeneid, VI, 851.” Tu regere imperio populos, Romane, memento/(Hae tibi erunt artes), pacisque imponere morem/Parcere subjectis et debellare superbos.” Fitzgerald Translation.

2 J. M. Coetzee, Waiting for the Barbarians (London, 1997), p.146. Coetzee presumably borrowed his title from Constantine Cavafis’s 1904 poem, which suggests that empires need barbarians: “And now, what’s going to happen to us without barbarians? / They were, those people, a kind of solution.”


5 Rüdiger Dingemann, Bewaffnete Konflikte seit 1945 (Düsseldorf, 1983), counted about 100 smaller and larger wars (between states, civil wars, wars of secession, rebellions, etc.) from 1945 to 1983, but did not attempt a global casualty toll. Since his publication, of course, the world has experienced the Gulf War of 1991, conflicts in the former Yugoslavia, Chechnya, continuing violence in Israel and the West Bank, a brief conflict between Peru and Ecuador, simmering Muslim-Hindu violence as well as a the India-Pakistan confrontation over Kashmir. I am chalkling up about fifty or sixty million deaths to the two World Wars, and about thirty millions to the earlier and later ones. Figures are open to interpretation: are wartime famines (e.g. Bengal 1943), and genocides (the Armenians, the Jews), to be counted as the result of war? See Walter Clemens, Jr. and J. David Singer, “The Human Cost of War,” with a total of about 80-90 million, but without including, it seems, related famines. Included in “Waging a New Kind of War,” Scientific American, June 2000, pp. 46-65. For statistical estimates of the losses to colonizers and indigenous peoples during the process of colonization, see Bouda Etemad, La possession du monde, Poids et mesures de la colonisation ( xviiè-xxè siècles) (Lausanne? Editions Complexe, 2000).

6 See the thoughtful contribution by Mark Osiel to the issue of state-sponsored atrocity, Mass Atrocity, Ordinary Evil, and Hannah Arendt : Criminal Consciousness in Argentina’s Dirty War (New Haven 2001), on issues wider than Argentina’s alone and the so-called banality of evil. On recent outbreaks, Philip Gurevich…and Johann Poiten, Rwanda….For the view that men enjoy combat and killing, Joanna Bourke, An Intimate History of Killing: Face-to-Face Killing in Twentieth-Century Warfare (New York, 1999); and Niall Ferguson, The Pity of War (Harmondsworth, 1998), pp.357-66-- both
arguments rendered indeterminate, I believe, by extrapolating from diaries without real quantitative evidence.

7 Mark Mazower, “Violence and the State in the Twentieth-Century,” American Historical Review, 107, 4 (October 2002): 1158-78. Anthony Giddens, The Nation-State and Violence (Cambridge, 1985); Michael Mann, The Sources of Social Power, vol. II, The Rise of Classes and Nation-States, 1760-1914 (Cambridge, 1993), The classic statement was Max Weber’s: “The state is the association that claims a monopoly on the legitimate use of force in a given territory” – which identified the state with resources of violence, stipulating as well though its territorial base and the fact that its claim to use force had to rely on legal norms – i.e. the Mafia, even an entrenched guerrilla movement was not a state. I have raised the issue of whether territory is still a prerequisite for state definitions (cf. “Consigning the Twentieth Century to History,” American Historical Review 105, 3 (June 2000): 807-31.

8 Gerd Lundestaad, “Empire by Invitation”; on American imperialism most recently Frank Ninkovich, The United States and Imperialism (Oxford and Malden, MA, 2001).


15 Susan Mattern, Rome and the Enemy: Imperial Strategy in the Principate (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), pp. 81-121 on logistics and size, 130-161 on expenditures.

16 For Cleon: Thucydides, Peloponnesian Wars, Book III, paragraphs 35-52. Cf. the British parliamentary debate over the 1919 atrocities committed by General Dyer at Amritsar Hansard, 5th ser. (Commons), cxxxi, pp. 1700-1812. For a graphic cinematic presentation of the torture issue, Gilles De Pontecorvo’s film, “The Battle of Algiers,” along with the confessions that have emerged in the last few years, e.g. Paul Aussaresses, Services Spéciaux: Algérie 1955-1957 (Paris: Perrin, 2001); also Congressional hearings on covert and nominally illegal Iran-Contra funding.

17 For the ambiguities of supposed democratic participation in the transition from republic to empire, see Henrik Mouritsen, Plebs and Politics in the Late Roman Republic (Cambridge, 2001).


19 For a survey, Michael W. Doyle, Empires (Ithaca, NY, 1986),


21 Indeed, serious trouble for the colonial powers predated the First World War for many reasons: formation of a colonial working class, nationalist movements, Islamic resurgence, etc. See among recent studies Peter Sluglett, “Aspects of Economy and Society in the Syrian Provinces: Aleppo in Transition, 1880-1925,” and C. A. Bayly,


25 Russell, Colonial Frontiers, p. xi.


The measurement of inequality is contentious and complicated. I cannot claim familiarity with the literature, but in any case I am advancing no simple claim about overall advancing inequality. For a recent analysis that suggests inequality within societies may be increasing while it is decreasing across nations, as weighted by population, see Glenn Firebaugh, *The New Geography of Global Income Inequality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), who discusses some of the literature to date, pp. 92-95. The perception of plutocracy may be a more relevant attribute of imperial politics, but, to be honest, this recurs periodically in societies that are not empires (including the US in the 1870s or 1920s) as well as in possibly imperial societies. Readers of this paper have also pointed out that the British empire was expanded during an era in which democracy was felt to be increasing and distinctions being leveled out. I would argue, however, that the perception of elite stratification did not diminish: elites can become more open in their recruitment even while their social and political influence become more powerful.


See Maier, “Empires or Nations,” in Levy and Roseman, eds., *op.cit*.


34 Susan Mattern explicitly has American preoccupations in mind when she discusses the motives for Trajan’s campaign in Dacia: “Considering the disparity in size between Rome and the Dacian kingdom, one might well question whether the latter could ever have posed a ‘real’ strategic threat to the empire. But for the Romans, their hegemony and their very security depended on universal recognition of their empire’s maiestas, its ‘greatness.’…Both of Trajan’s Dacian wars were wars of punishment and revenge….” Mattern, Rome and the Enemy, pp. 209-10.

35 Mazower, American Historical Review, p.1164.


38 But see David Hume’s meditation, “Whether the British Government inclines more to Absolute Monarchy or to a Republic,” in Charles Hendel, ed., David Hume’s Political Essays (New York: Library of Liberal Arts, 1953), pp. 72-76.