An Empire in Denial
The Limits of US Imperialism

I
t used to be only foreigners and those on the fringes of US politics who referred to the “American Empire.” Invariably, they did so in order to criticize the United States. Since the attack on the World Trade Center in September 2001, however, there has been a growing volume of more serious writing on the subject of an American empire. The phrase is now heard both in polite academic company and in mainstream public debate. The striking thing is that not all those who now openly use the term “empire” do so pejoratively. A number of commentators—notably Max Boot, Thomas Donnelly, Robert Kaplan, and Charles Krauthammer—seem to relish the idea of a US imperium. “Today there is only one empire,” James Kurth of Swarthmore College declared in a recent article in the National Interest, “the global empire of the United States.”

Officially, however, the United States remains an empire in denial. In the words of US President George Bush during his presidential election campaign in 2000: “America has never been an empire. We may be the only great power in history that had the chance, and refused—preferring greatness to power, and justice to glory.” Freud defined denial as a primitive psychological defense mechanism against trauma. Perhaps it was therefore inevitable that, in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks, US citizens would deny their country’s imperial character more vehemently than ever. It may nevertheless be therapeutic to determine the precise nature of this American Empire—since empire it is, in all but name.

Military Pre-eminence

Imperial denial may simply be a matter of semantics. Many post-war writers about US power have used words like “hegemon” to convey the idea that US overseas influence is great but not imperial. There are other useful alternatives to the term “empire,” including “unipolarity,” global “leadership,” and “the only superpower.” Define the term “empire” narrowly enough, and the United States can easily be excluded from the category. Suppose empire is taken to mean “the forcible military occupation and governance of territory whose citizens remain permanently excluded from political representation.” By that definition, the American Empire is laughably small. The United States accounts for around 6.5 percent of the world’s surface, but its 14 formal dependencies add up to a mere 0.007 percent. In demographic terms, the United States and its dependencies account for barely five percent of the world’s population, whereas the British ruled between one-fifth and one-quarter of the world’s population at the zenith of their empire.

Yet this narrow definition of empire is as simplistic as it is convenient. To begin with, the expansion of the original 13 US states westwards and southwards in the course of the 19th century was itself a quintessentially imperialist undertaking. In both the US and British empires, indigenous populations were vanquished, expropriated and marginalized. The people living in the newer states were all ul-
timately enfranchised, but so were the settler populations of large tracts of the British Empire: “responsible government” was, after all, granted to Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa. The only substantial difference between the two processes of white settlement was that the United States absorbed most of its new territories—even Alaska and Hawaii—into its federal system, whereas the British never did more than toy with the idea of imperial federation.

In any case, the US empire is—and can afford to be—much less concerned with the acquisition of large areas of overseas territory than Britain’s was. The United States has few formal colonies, but it possesses a great many small areas of territory within notionally sovereign states that serve as bases for its armed services. Before the deployment of troops for the invasion of Iraq, the US military had around 752 military installations located in more than 130 countries. New wars have meant new bases, like Camp Bondsteel in Kosovo, acquired during the 1999 war against Yugoslavia, and the Bishkek airbase in Kyrgyzstan, an “asset” picked up during the war against the Taliban regime in Afghanistan.

When the full extent of US military presence overseas is made plain, then the claim that the United States is not an empire rings hollow indeed. Nor should it be forgotten what formidable military technology can be unleashed from these bases. Commentators like to point out that the Pentagon’s budget equals the combined military expenditures of the next 12 to 15 states. Such fiscal measures nevertheless underestimate the quantitative and qualitative lead currently enjoyed by US armed forces. In military terms, the British Empire did not dominate the full spectrum of military capabilities, as the United States does today; it was never so far ahead of its imperial rivals. If military power is the sine qua non of an empire, then it is hard to deny the imperial character of the United States today. The US sphere of military influence is now quite literally global.

It is, of course, conventional wisdom that large-scale overseas military commitments can have deleterious economic effects. Yet the United States seems a very long way from the kind of “overstretch” Paul Kennedy warned against in the late 1980s. According to one estimate, “America’s 31 percent share of world product (at market prices) is equal to the next four countries (Japan, Germany, Britain, and France) combined,” which exceeds the highest share of global output ever achieved by Great Britain by a factor of three. In terms of raw resources, then, the United States is already a vastly more powerful empire than Britain ever was. The rapid growth of the US economy since the late 1980s partly explains how the United States has managed to achieve a unique revolution in military affairs while at the same time substantially reducing the share of defense expenditures as a proportion of gross domestic product (GDP). The Defense Department Green Paper published in March 2003 forecast total expenditure on national defense to remain at 3.5 percent of GDP for at least three years, compared with an average figure during the Cold War of seven percent. Bearing in mind Paul Kennedy’s “formula” that “if a particular nation is allocating over the long term more than 10 percent of gross national product (GNP) to armaments, that is likely to limit its growth rate,” there seems little danger of imminent “overstretch.”

In short, in terms of military capability and economic resources the United States not only resembles the last great Anglophone empire but exceeds it. Nor are its goals so very different. In September 2002, the Office of the President produced a document on “National Security Strategy” that explicitly states that it is a goal of US foreign policy “to extend the benefits of freedom ... to every corner of the

**Opposite:** Canadian soldiers from the International Security Assistance Force arrive at Kabul International Airport in Afghanistan. Above: US soldiers set up a check point in Baghdad, Iraq.

*Photos Courtesy AFP/Getty Images*
world.” There are those who argue that such altruism is quite different from the more self-serving aims of British imperialism, but this betrays an ignorance of the comparably liberal ethos of the Victorian Empire. In any case, the National Security Strategy also asserts that the United States reserves the right, if the President should deem it necessary, to take pre-emptive military action against any state perceived as a threat to US security. If the US population still refuses to acknowledge that they have become an empire, the doctrine of pre-emption suggests—by way of a compromise—a possible neologism. Perhaps the United States today should be characterized as a pre-empire.

City on a Hill

One argument sometimes advanced to distinguish US “hegemony” from British Empire is qualitative. US power, it is argued, consists not just of military and economic power but also of “soft” power. According to Joseph Nye, “A country may obtain the outcomes it wants in world politics because other countries want to follow it, admiring its values, emulating its example, aspiring to its level of prosperity and openness.” Soft power, in other words, is getting what you want without sticks or carrots. In the case of the United States, “it comes from being a shining ‘city upon a hill’”—an enticing New Jerusalem of economic and political liberty. Nye is not so naïve as to assume that the US way is inherently attractive to everyone, everywhere. But he does believe that making it attractive matters more than ever before because of the global spread of information technology. To put it simply, soft power can reach the parts of the world that hard power cannot.

But does this really make US power so very different from imperial power? On the contrary. If anything, it illustrates how very like the last Anglophone empire the United States has become. The British Empire, too, sought to make its values attractive to others, though initially the job had to be done by “men on the spot.” British missionaries, businessmen, administrators, and schoolmasters fanned out across the globe to “entice and attract” people toward British values.

These foot-slogging efforts were eventually reinforced by technology. It was the advent of wireless radio—and specifically the creation of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC)—which really ushered in the age of soft power in Nye’s sense of the term. Within six years, the BBC had launched its first foreign language service—in Arabic, significantly—and, by the end of 1938, it was broadcasting around the world in all the major languages of continental Europe.

In some ways, the soft power that Britain could exert in the 1930s was greater than the soft power of the United States today. In a world of newspapers, radio receivers, and cinemas—where the number of content-supplying corporations (often national monopolies) was relatively small—the overseas broadcasts of the BBC could hope to reach a relatively large number of foreign ears. Yet whatever soft power Britain thereby wielded did nothing to halt the precipitous

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**VYING FOR POWER**

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The graph on the left shows five selected countries with large gross domestic products (GDPs), derived from purchasing power parity calculations. The graph on the right depicts the military spending budgets of those countries. The graphs suggest that the United States is clearly the dominant economic and military power today, much like the British Empire at its height.

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decline of British power after the 1930s.

This raises the question of how much US soft power really matters today. If the term is to denote anything more than cultural background music to more traditional forms of dominance, it surely needs to be demonstrated that the United States can secure what it wants from other countries without coercing or suborning them, but purely because its cultural exports are seductive. One reason for skepticism about the extent of US soft power today is the very nature of the channels of communication for US culture, the various electronic media through which US culture is currently transmitted tend to run from the United States to Western Europe, Japan, and in the case of television, Latin America. It would be too much to conclude that US soft power is abundant where it is least needed, for it may well be that a high

level of exposure to US cinema and television is one of the reasons why Western Europe, Japan, and Latin America are on the whole less hostile to the United States than countries in the Middle East and Asia. But the fact remains that the range of US soft power in Nye’s sense is more limited than is generally assumed.

One important qualification applies. Whatever the critics of the United States may say, the United States is indeed a very attractive place—and its attraction extends far beyond the range of AOL-Time Warner and CNN. It is so attractive that millions of foreigners want either to visit the country or to move here permanently. In 2000, for example, more than 50 million people visited the United States, making it the world’s second most popular holiday destination (after France). That figure is more than double the approximately 20 million US citizens who traveled abroad on vacation. The United States also remains a popular destination for immigrants, with an annual net influx of around three people per thousand of population. Between 1974 and 1998, around 16.7 million foreigners came to live in the United States. About 26 million current US residents were born abroad, a number that vastly exceeds the four million US-born residents abroad. This is, of course, in marked contrast to the experience of Great Britain, which was a remarkable exporter of people throughout its imperial heyday. Between 1850 and 1950, nearly 18 million people left the British Isles.

But does this make the United States more or less powerful? Proponents of the “soft power” thesis argue that the very large numbers of foreign students who come to US universities act—unwittingly—as the agents of US empire when they return to their native lands, imbued with the distinctive value systems of the Harvard Business School or the Stanford Political Science Department. “The ability of the American empire to govern its domains,” argues James Kurth, “will depend upon its success in producing this distinct kind of immigrant/emigrant to serve as its distinct kind of imperial civil official.” There are two reasons why this seems over-optimistic. First, a substantial proportion of the foreign students simply never return home to spread the

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good news about US principles and practice. The second is that a very substantial number of the leading nationalists who opposed and ultimately supplant British rule in both Asia and Africa were themselves the beneficiaries of British university education.

An Erring Empire

The United States, then, is an empire—but a peculiar kind of empire. It is militarily and economically peerless. It has great, though not unbounded, cultural reach. Yet its distinctive limitations. It is an empire based not on colonization, but on net immigration. There are also important limits to the way in which its wealth can be deployed. First, there is good reason to fear that, in the foreseeable future, the costs of the US welfare system—specifically, the systems of Medicare and Social Security—will begin to outstrip tax revenues. According to one recent estimate, the difference between the present value of all the federal government’s future liabilities and the present value of all its future tax receipts amounts to a staggering US$4 trillion. Only steep cuts in public expenditure or increases in taxation will enable the government to avoid a grave fiscal crisis.

Secondly, the prosperity of the United States has become heavily reliant on very large inflows of foreign capital. With
the current account deficit rising above five percent of GDP last year, much (not least the exchange rate of the dollar) depends on the continued willingness of foreign investors to put their savings into dollar-denominated assets. Once again, the contrast between Britain in her imperial prime is Australia, and Hong Kong). Barely one percent of US Foreign Direct Investment goes to the Middle East, and even less (0.8 percent) goes to China. This is a far cry from the "dollar diplomacy" of the 1920s, when US loans to strategically important countries in Europe and Latin America played an important role in underpinning US foreign policy. Today, foreign investors are theoretically the ones who have leverage over the United States, since fully 40 percent of the federal debt in public hands is held by foreigners.

This is not to say that those pessimists are right who predict imminent relative decline for the United States. What it does mean is that the United States is not quite the hyperpuissance of French nightmares. And what it also means is that, in dealing with transnational threats such as terrorism, international crime, nuclear proliferation, and infectious diseases like AIDS or SARS—to say nothing of global warming—the United States can achieve relatively little by acting unilaterally. As surely as the continuation of international free trade depends on multilateral institutions, so too does the successful prosecution of the war against terrorism.

Does this mean that the United States is not, after all, an empire? On the contrary. As that great imperial statesman Lord Salisbury well understood, there was nothing more dangerous to a great empire than what he called, with heavy irony, "splendid isolation." Then as now, the great Anglphone empire needs perforce to work in concert with the lesser—but not negligible—great powers in order to achieve its objectives.

Consider just one example. It is becoming abundantly clear following the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq that the United States is not capable of effective peacekeeping—that is to say, policing—without some foreign assistance. Peacekeeping is not what US soldiers are trained to do, nor do they have much appetite for it. It also seems reasonable to assume that the US electorate will not tolerate US soldiers' prolonged exposure to the unglamorous hazards of "low-intensity conflict," with suicide bombers at checkpoints, snipers down alleys, and missile grenade attacks on convoys. The obvious solution is to continue the now well established practice of delegating peacekeeping to the United Nations and, under its auspices, to the US European allies. According to figures published in Foreign Policy magazine, the EU states contributed more than twice as much to UN peacekeeping operations as the United States in the years 2000 and 2001.

It is also noteworthy that EU states also contributed three times as much in effective aid to poor countries. Those, like Robert Kagan, who dismiss the Europeans as Kant-reading Venusians—as opposed to America's macho Martians—overlook the crucial significance of Pluto in the

An Afghan child suffering from a high fever sits outside his tent in the Kotki refugee camp near the Pakistan-Afghanistan border.

pronounced. In the British case, net foreign investment was consistently positive between the mid 1870s and World War I, rising to a peak of nine percent of GDP in 1913. Moreover, the destinations of British overseas investment were very diverse: substantial shares flowed to those relatively poor countries in which Britain had a disproportionate strategic interest. By comparison, US citizens who invest abroad favor Europe (especially Britain) and the Pacific (especially Japan,
process of “nation building.” Without hefty investment in creating the rule of law and priming the pump of economic recovery, countries like Afghanistan and Iraq will stagnate, if not disintegrate altogether. Unless the United States radically alters its attitudes toward peacekeeping and aid, it will have little option but to cooperate with the more generous Europeans. Unilateralism, like isolation, is not so splendid after all. Indeed, it is seldom a realistic option for an empire.

Dangers of Denial
The Victorian historian J.R. Seeley famously joked that the British had “conquered and peopled half the world in a fit of absence of mind.” In acquiring their empire, the United States has followed this example. Few Europeans today doubt the existence of a US empire. But as the German theologian Reinhold Niebuhr noted in 1960, Americans persist in “frantically avoiding recognition of the imperialism [they] in fact exercise.”

Does it matter? The answer is yes. The problem with an empire that is in denial about its own imperial nature is that it tends to make two mistakes when it chooses to intervene in the affairs of lesser states. The first is to attempt economic and political transformation in an unrealistically short timeframe. The second is to allocate insufficient resources to the project. As I write, both of these mistakes are being made in Iraq and Afghanistan. By insisting that US forces will remain in Iraq until a democratic government can be established “and not a day longer,” US spokesmen unintentionally create a powerful disincentive for local people to cooperate with them. Who in Iraq today can feel confident that, if he lends support to US initiatives, he will not simply lay himself open to the charge of collaboration when the US troops depart?

Moreover, who would wish to cooperate with an occupying force that spent all its resources on itself and devoted next to nothing to aid or reconstruction? A successful empire is seldom solely based on coercion; there must be some economic dividends for the ruled as well as the rulers, if only to buy the loyalty of indigenous elites. Yet in Iraq and Afghanistan the amounts of money the United States has made available to potential local partners have been paltry.

To put it bluntly, the United States is acting like a colos- sus with an attention deficit disorder engaged in cut-price colonization. And that is perhaps the reason why this vastly powerful economy, with its extraordinary military capability, has had such a very disappointing record when it has sought to bring about changes of regime abroad. According to one recent study, just four out of 16 US military interventions in foreign countries have been successful in establishing US-style institutions over the past century. The worst failures—in Haiti, Vietnam, Cuba, and Cambodia—might well be attributed to this fatal combination of a truncated time horizon and inadequate resources for non-military purposes.

There is no question, as we have seen, that the United States has the raw economic resources to take on the old British role as underwriter of a globalized, liberalized economic system. Nor is there any doubt that it has the military capability to do the job. On both scores, the United States is already a far more powerful empire than Britain’s ever was. Perhaps—though I am less persuaded about this—its “soft power” is also greater. Yet the unspoken American Empire suffers from serious structural weaknesses. It imports rather than exports high quality human capital. It also imports more capital than it exports—and exports virtually none to pivotal regions like the Middle East. It underestimates the need to act in partnership with allied great powers. And its efforts at nation-building are both short-term and under-funded.

Some US neo-imperialists like to quote Kipling’s “White Man’s Burden,” written in 1899 to encourage US President William McKinley’s empire-building efforts in the Philippines. But Kipling wrote another poem, two years earlier, which they would also do well to remember. Entitled “Recessional,” it was a somber intimation of mortality, perfectly crafted to temper late Victorian delusions of grandeur:

Far-called our navies melt away—
On dune and headland sinks the fire—
Lo, all our pomp of yesterday
Is one with Nineveh and Tyre!
Judge of the Nations, spare us yet,
Lest we forget—lest we forget!"