

2003

The Challenges of American Imperial Power

Michael Ignatieff

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review>

Recommended Citation

Ignatieff, Michael (2003) "The Challenges of American Imperial Power," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 56 : No. 2 , Article 6.
Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol56/iss2/6>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Naval War College Review by an authorized editor of U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu.

THE CHALLENGES OF AMERICAN IMPERIAL POWER

Michael Ignatieff

We live in a world that has no precedents since the age of the later Roman emperors. What is so remarkable is not simply the military domination of the world by a single power. In Alfred Thayer Mahan's time, Britain dominated the seas (but had to share its domination with a number of other navies). It is not just the fact that this single power, the United States, has achieved its dominance at incredibly low cost to its economy—some 3.5 percent of gross domestic product. It is not simply the awesome reach of its military capability—the ability of an air command center in Saudi Arabia to deliver B-52 strikes on a mountaintop in Afghanistan within seventeen minutes of receiving target

Dr. Ignatieff is Carr Professor of the Practice of Human Rights and the director of the Carr Center of Human Rights Policy at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government. Professor Ignatieff earned his doctorate in history from Harvard University and has been a fellow at King's College, Cambridge; l'École des Hautes Études, Paris; and S. Antony's College, Oxford. His recent scholarly books include Human Rights as Politics and Idolatry (2001), The Rights Revolution (2000), Virtual War: Kosovo and Beyond (2000), The Warrior's Honor: Ethnic War and the Modern Conscience (U.S. edition 1998), Isaiah Berlin: A Life (1998), and Blood and Belonging: Journeys into the New Nationalism (U.S. edition 1994). This article was adapted from a lecture delivered at the Naval War College on 12 November 2002.

Naval War College Review, Spring 2003, Vol. LVI, No. 2

coordinates from special forces on the ground. Nor is it resolve; terrorists everywhere have been cured of the illusion created by the American debacle in Somalia in 1993 that America lacks the stomach for a fight. What is remarkable is the combination of all these: technological dominance at a lower cost proportional to wealth than at any other time in history, absence of peer competitors, and inflexible resolve to defend its way of life—and those of other nations as well, who, like Canada (I happen to be a Canadian citizen), are happy to shelter under American imperial protection.

Parallels to the Roman Empire become evident. The difference, however, is that the Romans were untroubled by having an empire or by the idea of an imperial destiny, while the Americans, who have had an

empire, it could be argued, since Theodore Roosevelt, persist in believing that they do not. The United States, then, is a unique empire—an imperial power without consciousness of itself as such. On 11 November 2002, President George W. Bush, remembering Americans in uniform who had laid down their lives, remarked in passing that America is not an empire—it has no imperial designs, no intention of conquest.* There is no reason not to take the president at his word; I am speaking of empire in a different way. Empires need not have colonies, need not be established by conquest and aggression; the United States is an empire in the sense that it structures the global order. It does so primarily with American military power, diplomatic resources, and economic assets, and it does so primarily in the service of its own national interests. If its interests can serve those of allies as well, so be it, but the United States acts on that basis even if they do not. It is impossible to understand the global order, or the sense in which it is an order at all, without understanding the permanently structuring role of American global power projection.

The well-known maps indicating the division of the globe into the “areas of responsibility” of CentCom, NorthCom, and all the other “Coms”[†] convey an idea of the architecture underlying the entire global order. This is a different vision of global order than Europe’s—that of a multilateral world ordered by international law. There is a great deal about international law that can be admired, but it seems to miss the fundamental point—the extent to which global order is sustained by American power. In November 2002, for instance, the United Nations Security Council passed, fifteen votes to none, a resolution on Iraq. We can be perfectly sure, however, that without the inflexible, unrelenting American pursuit, through those multilateral institutions, of the U.S. national interest, nothing would have happened in respect to Saddam Hussein’s weapons of mass destruction. Multilateral institutions like the United Nations are important, but their entire momentum, force, and direction are driven by American power; literally nothing happens in these institutions unless the Americans put their shoulders to the wheel. It is in that sense that I refer to America’s exercise of an imperial structuring and ordering role in the world, and in that sense that there is an analogy to Rome.

But there is a more troubling parallel—troubling for those who use military power for a living—with the Roman Empire in its later centuries. It is that

* “Over the generations, Americans have defended this nation without seeking to dominate any nation. American troops do not come as conquerors, but as liberators.” “President Commemorates Veterans Day at Arlington Nat[ional] Cemetery,” *The White House*, www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/11/20021111-3.htm [22 November 2002].

† The nine unified combatant commands—including U.S. Central Command and U.S. Northern Command. See “Unified Combatant Commands,” *Defense Almanac*, www.defenselink.mil/pubs/almanac/almanac/organization/Combatant_Commands.

overwhelming military superiority does not translate into security. Mastery of the known world does not confer peace of mind. America has now felt the dread that the ancient world must have known when Rome itself was first threatened by the Goths. In the fifth century, an imperial people awakened fully to the menace of the barbarians on the frontier when they poured over the marches and sacked the city; today the menace lies just beyond the zone of stable democratic states that see the Pentagon, and until 2001 the World Trade Center, as headquarters. In those border zones, modern-day barbarians can use technology to collapse distance, to inflict devastating damage on centers of power far away. In March 2001, I asked an audience of U.S. Naval Academy midshipmen from which country the next threat to their ships would come; they could not answer the question. I suggested Afghanistan, to stunned silence. Even to these educated young men and women, only five months after the attack on the USS *Cole*, the strategic challenge that a tiny country on India's northwest frontier could pose to the United States was not evident.

We have now awakened to the barbarians. We have awakened to the radical collapse and distance that they have wrought. Retribution has been visited on the barbarians, and more will follow, but the U.S. military knows that it has begun a campaign without an obvious end, and that knowledge has already affected the American way of life and the way Americans think about it. The most carefree empire in history now confronts the question of whether it can escape Rome's ultimate fate. The challenge can be localized, for a moment in Afghanistan, then in Iraq, but it is global in character, and that is unsettling. There are pacification operations, overt or covert, already under way in Yemen, in Somalia, in the Sudan. According to the *Washington Post*, al-Qa'ida attempts to launder financial assets have been traced to Lebanese business circles that control the export of diamonds from Sierra Leone, Liberia, Angola, and the Congo. There are cells to be rooted out in the Philippines and in Indonesia. Now, at this writing, there is the prospect of an operation against Iraq, of which the primary purpose, self-evidently, is the elimination not only of weapons of mass destruction but of the core of Arab rejectionism. Its aim is to break the logjam that has frustrated Middle East peace for fifty-odd years and then to reorder the map of an entire area to serve the strategic interests of the United States. If that is not an imperial project, what is?

An American empire that had since the defeat in Vietnam been cautious in its designs has been roused to go on the offensive. The awakening was brutal, but there might be reason, in an ironic way, to be thankful—as a great poet once said, barbarians are a “kind of solution.”* Barbarism is not new; fanaticism is not

* Constantine Cavafy (Konstantinos Kavafis, 1863–1933), in *Awaiting the Barbarians*: “Now what's going to happen to us without barbarians? / Those people were a kind of solution.”

new. What is new is the connection between barbarian asymmetric methods and a global ideology, Islam, that provides a bottomless supply of recruits and allies for a global war. Also new is the way in which fanatics have exploited the values of our society—our openness and freedom, as well as our technology—to take war to the heart of the empire.

The single most dangerous thing about terrorism is the claim that terrorists are responding to grievances about which, in fact, they do not care. The 11 September attackers made no demands at all, declared no explicit political agenda. They went to their deaths in complete silence. Nonetheless, hundreds of millions of people accepted them as representatives of their own long-frustrated political desires—to drive Israel into the sea, to expel America from the holy places, and so on. The hijackers themselves were more interested in the spectacle of destruction, in violence for its own sake, than in the redemption of the down-trodden, but they have been taken as martyrs for political ends.

Unless some of those political ends can be addressed, it is not clear that there can be an appropriate solution to the problem of terrorism; the U.S. armed forces are being asked to solve militarily a problem that probably, in the end, has only political solutions. Robust military responses are needed, but they must be

But the case to rebuild Iraq is fundamentally not ethical but prudential—it is a smart thing to do.

part of a political strategy—in fact, a geopolitical strategy, one that recognizes that the American homeland has found itself caught in the crossfire of a civil war. The terrorists are not attacking only

the United States, or even the West; they are also coming after its Arab allies. They want nothing more than to return the Arab world to A.D. 640, to the time of the Prophet. The civil war is a desperate struggle between the politics of pure reaction, represented by client Arab regimes, and the politics of the impossible—the desire to take these societies out of modernity altogether. That viewpoint brings home how exposed politically the United States is. One aspect of that vulnerability that the attacks of 11 September 2001 laid bare is the extent to which the West has treated its Arab allies as mere gas stations. These Arab states have become decayed and incompetent betrayers of their own people, and betraying and incompetent defenders of U.S. interests. The American empire is in the process of discovering that in the Middle East the pillars upon which it depends for support are built of sand; that is one element of the political challenge it faces.

Another element, and one of the unacknowledged causes of “9/11,” is the juxtaposition of globalized prosperity in the “American world” with the disintegration of states and state order in places that achieved independence from the colonial empires after the Second World War. American hegemony in the post-

Cold War world has coincided with a process of state disintegration. The United States has achieved global hegemony just as the global order is beginning to come apart at the seams. Not only are the colonial states that arose between 1947 and 1960 in Africa and Asia starting to unravel (Exhibit A being Pakistan), but the states, like Georgia, that achieved independence with the end of the Soviet empire are also beginning to fragment. American hegemony, then, is a position of special fragility.

America as the remaining empire has been left with the problems that the older empires could not solve—creating nation-state stability in the critical postcolonial zones. In places like Pakistan, the collapse of state institutions has been exacerbated by urbanization, by the relentless growth of shantytowns that collect unemployed or underemployed males who see the promise of globalized prosperity on television in every cafe but cannot enjoy it themselves. In such places the collapsing state fabric creates a vacuum. Who fills the vacuum? The mullahs. They fill the vacuum not simply with indoctrination and cheap hatred but by provision of real services. A poor parent in rural Pakistan near the north-west frontier who wants a child to get an education sends him to a *madrasesh*. Parents with children they cannot look after send them to the mullah. However uncomfortable it is to accept, terrorist movements are creating legitimacy in this way, by providing services to fill the gap left by the absence of credible and competent states.

The political Left uses “empire” as an epithet—imperial America, it declares, can do anything, can shape the world chessboard any way it wants. The implication of the foregoing, however, is that America is not in a position to create stability on whatever terms it likes. The United States is the sole guarantor of order, yet its capacity to control and determine outcomes is often quite limited, and nowhere are the limitations of American power more evident than in the Middle East. Since Franklin D. Roosevelt embraced the Saudis and Harry Truman recognized Israel, American leadership has driven out the other potential arbiters, the Russians and Europeans, without being able to impose its own terms for permanent peace. Presidents have come and gone, but they have not been able to resolve this enduring hemorrhage of American national prestige.

For fifty years, the United States paid almost nothing for its support for Israel. This was a debt of honor, a linkage between two democratic peoples. But three or four years ago, it began to pay an ever higher strategic price for the continued Israeli occupation of the Palestinian lands—an inability to broker a settlement that would guarantee security for the Palestinian and Israeli peoples on the basis, essentially, of partition. American failure to impose such a settlement has now brought national security costs; the events of 11 September 2001 cannot be understood apart from that fatal dynamic. But it is a dynamic that indicates the

limitations of U.S. power, even with close and devoted allies. American presidents may well hesitate to put even more prestige on the line in this issue; if they overreach in the Middle East, they may lose everything, while if they do not invest enough, they may lose anyway. They are always managing the chief problem of empire—balancing hubris and prudence. Today, in the face of a global challenge and the collapsing of distance, the decision “triage”—making the distinction between hubristic overreach and prudential caution—is much more complicated. It is much more difficult to dismiss any nation—say, Afghanistan—as marginal, of no importance; any such nation is likely suddenly to become a national security threat.

It is not just the Middle East that highlights simultaneously America’s awesome power and vulnerability. When American naval planners look south from the Suez Canal, for instance, they see nothing good. Sudan, Somalia, Djibouti, Eritrea, Yemen—all are dangerous places, and some of them have been fatal to American service men and women. One of the traditional diplomatic and political functions of the U.S. Navy is to represent and promote American imperial power by showing presence, going ashore, showing the flag. But as the United

The world order arranged by Churchill and Roosevelt is being replaced by American military power—and that is asking of it more than it can do.

States has realized that forward land bases for its other kinds of combat power are more and more vulnerable, the Navy’s role has begun to shift to that of an offshore weapons platform. Cutting back military presence in places that

are too vulnerable to terrorist attack seems to be good news—after the USS *Cole* attack, certainly. The cost, however, is that reducing base presence in these places also reduces influence and potentially increases alienation. This is the well-known downside to reducing exposure to terrorist attack. Americans come to be regarded as a mysterious offshore presence, focused on weapons and discipline, not on making friends, not on making alliances, not on making local contact.

All this makes it apparent that the United States emerged from the Cold War with very little idea of the strategic challenges that would face it afterward. It won the Cold War by virtue of a strategic act of political-military discipline carried out by administration after administration from 1947 to 1989. It was one of the most sustained displays of political and military resolution in the history of republics, and it brought triumphant success. But the nation’s post-1991 performance looks much more like what used to be said of the British—the consolidation of empire in a fit of absence of mind. Successive administrations—this is not a political point—thought they could have imperial dominion on the

cheap. They thought that they could rule a postcolonial, post-Soviet world with the imperial architecture, military alliances, legal institutions, and international-development organizations that Franklin Roosevelt and Winston Churchill had created to defeat Hitler. As the world order arranged by Churchill and Roosevelt comes apart, no new architectures, alliances, institutions, or organizations have been established to replace the old. What has actually been put in their place is American military power—and that is asking of it more than it can do. The Greeks taught the Romans to call this failure *hubris*. But it is also a failure of historical imagination—making the American military the preferred solution for disorder that is replicating itself around the globe in overlapping zones and posing a security threat at home. It is an imperial problem that seems to be heading for disaster.

A second fundamental imperial problem for the United States, on a par with its structural vulnerability, is the fact that it is alone. Its neighbor Canada spends 1.1 percent of its gross domestic policy on national defense, and its armed forces are incapable even of defending the Canadian homeland. In Europe, large countries with long military traditions are investing in national defense at levels of 2 percent, 2.2 percent, 2.3 percent of GDP; they are no longer credible military allies. The military consequence is obvious in combined operations, but there is also a political aspect, an irony that has received too little attention—that for Europe, spending so little on weapons is an enormous, historic achievement. The Europeans spent so much on arms for 250 years that they nearly destroyed their continent in two world wars. Today, they are trading down military strength so sharply as to affect their very national identities; the European states have become postmilitary cultures. In a sense, as Europe integrates into the European Union, these states are even becoming “postnational” cultures.

This trend is producing a widening gap with the United States, not simply in defense expenditure and military capability but in mentality. Europeans—whose ancestors invented the very idea of martial patriotism, national conscription, and national anthem—now look at American patriotism and think it an utterly alien phenomenon. The United States, then, is the West’s last military nation-state. It can no longer call on allies who fully understand the centrality of military power and sacrifice in national identity. This isolation will be a long-term imperial challenge, because the decline of European defense budgets seems to be irreversible, and a particularly difficult one, because America cannot do without Europe in civilian terms. However contemptible its military capabilities become, Europe’s social and economic reconstruction capacity is simply essential. The United States must cooperate with these postnational, postmartial nation-states; without them the American taxpayer will have to foot the entire bill for not only their own defense but the maintenance of global order.

Thus, on a specific issue of moment, it is possible that the most efficient solution to a postinvasion occupation of Iraq would be a U.S. military government—a Douglas McArthur in Baghdad. Putting a qualified, tough American general in charge of a military chain of command would be the most efficient, and might be the cheapest, way to coordinate effort and resources. But the Europeans would not have it. No Middle Eastern state would have it. The idea is simply not acceptable internationally; if it were pushed, no one would support the reconstruction effort; the United States would bear the entire cost.

This instance points to a very different picture of the world than that entertained by liberal international lawyers and human rights activists who hope to see American power integrated into a transnational legal and economic order organized around the United Nations, the International Criminal Court, the World Trade Organization, and human rights treaties. Theirs is a feeble vision, as we have seen; without American power, the multilateral international order is a train without an engine.

There is a third imperial problem, or at least an inevitable part of a global war on terror—nation building. Afghanistan has brought the point home. However extraterritorial, nonterritorial, or nonnational a terrorist organization may be, it needs facilities, especially to train its “foot soldiers.” Terrorists cannot sustain themselves without compliant states who allow them to operate secretly or even, as in this case, actually to run their foreign and domestic policies and fence off large pieces of real estate. The United States sat and watched that happen in Afghanistan for four years; that must never, ever, happen again. The United States has learned that failed states can become direct national security risks and that accordingly, like the idea or not, it is in the nation-building, or state-reconstruction, business.

The exercise of nation building, however, raises a number of ethical difficulties. In fact, there lies at the very heart of the matter a fundamental contradiction of principle and policy. The concept of human rights, which is the semiofficial ideology of the Western world, sustains the principle of self-determination—the right of each people to rule itself, free of outside interference. It is a proposition dear to Americans, who fought a revolution to secure the right to self-determination; it is the core of their democratic culture. How can the imperial act of nation building be reconciled with it? The old imperial solution is collapsing; the problem falls ineluctably to the United States; nation building is unavoidable. But how is it to be done? Bringing order is the paradigmatic imperial task, but it is essential for reasons both of economy and principle that it be done without denying local people their right to some degree of self-determination.

The old imperialism, the nineteenth-century kind, justified itself as a mission to civilize, to inculcate in tribes and “lesser breeds” the habits of self-discipline necessary for the exercise of self-rule. This is not a minor point. We often think that imperialism and self-determination are completely contradictory—self-rule by strangers. Interestingly, however, all the nineteenth-century empires

used self-determination to maintain themselves. How? By making a promise: “If you submit to us now, we will train you to be free tomorrow.” Self-determination and imperialism, then, are not the polar

The most carefree empire in history now confronts the question of whether it can escape Rome’s ultimate fate.

opposites they seem to be; as paradoxical as it may sound, self-determination is a means by which to perpetuate imperial rule. Canada, for instance, was for a hundred years a self-governing dominion within the British Empire. In the old imperialism, self-rule did not have to happen any time soon. The British kept their hold on India for most of the twentieth century with assurances: “You are not quite ready yet. Just be patient, and we will hand over to you.” The British mandate in Palestine took the same tack.

The new imperialism works on a much shorter time span. The contradiction between imperialism and democracy is much sharper in places like Afghanistan, Kosovo, and Bosnia. The prospect of self-rule cannot be distant, because the local elites are creations of modern nationalism, of which the primary ethical content is self-determination. In Kosovo, Bosnia, and Afghanistan, and quite probably in Iraq, the mantra is that local elites must be empowered to take over as soon as imperial forces create conditions of stability and security. Nation building thus seeks to reconcile imperial power and local self-determination through the vehicle of an “exit strategy.” This is imperialism in a hurry to spend money, get results, to turn over to the locals, and get out. But it is similar to the old imperialism in the sense that the real power remains in imperial capitals. Local leaders, even if elected by their own peoples, exercise limited power and must always look over their shoulders to Washington. This new imperialism, then, is humanitarian in theory but imperial in practice; it creates “subsovereignty,” in which states possess independence in name but not in fact. The reason the Americans are in Afghanistan, or the Balkans, after all, is to maintain imperial order in zones essential to the interest of the United States. They are there to maintain order against a barbarian threat.

Many people, particularly in the United States, feel that this is a terrible misuse of American combat power and resources. They consider it hubris that will suck the nation into open-ended and unmanageable commitments. But are there alternatives? There seems to be no other way in which to make the world

safe for the United States. Exercises of imperial power are in themselves neither illegitimate or immoral. For U.S. forces and resources to create (in Iraq, say) stable democratic institutions, establish the rule of law, and then leave would be creditable—provided, of course, that the new democratic elite is not simply an American puppet. The caveat would be especially critical in Iraq, and reconciling imperial power and democracy would become particularly delicate there. We would have to create, or help to create, or help to repatriate a genuinely credible national leadership. The Iraqi National Congress, the Iraqi exiles in general, are “not ready for prime time,” and there is no credible counter-elite in the country itself. The biggest challenge the United States would have in making Iraq work is to find that elite and sustain it—and yet allow it the independence it would need to achieve acceptance within the nation. It is not at all clear how that can be done, but if the United States expels the Saddam Hussein regime, it will have to be.

Does the United States have the right, in international law, to impose regime change? I was a member of an international commission on intervention and state sovereignty funded by the Canadian government and charged to report to the UN Secretary General in September 2001. Our report set the ethical bar very high. The commission argued that the only grounds for full-scale military intervention in a state were human rights violations on the order of genocidal massacre or massive ethnic cleansing. We believed that it is not a good idea for America or any other country to knock over more or less at will sovereign regimes, even odious ones. The United States would be, or feel, called upon to intervene everywhere, and whatever remains of the UN Charter system governing the use of force in the postwar world would be destroyed. In that view—embarrassing as it is for a human rights activist to say—intervention in Iraq is not justifiable on strict human rights grounds. However, the *combination* of the regime’s human rights behavior and its possession (actual or imminent) of weapons of mass destruction constitutes that ethical justification—provided that, as required by just-war theory, the military instrument is the last resort. The exercise of securing Security Council legitimacy was a matter not of obtaining permission but of establishing good faith, to document the crucial fact that the use of American power was being contemplated only after a decade of attempts to disarm Saddam Hussein by other means.

There is another ethical issue as well—under what obligation is the United States to build a new Iraqi nation once it has knocked the door down? It is not obvious in classical just-war theory that commencing hostilities obliges a nation to clean up afterward. Whether such an obligation exists is a lacuna of just-war theory. International law lists the things that legitimize the use of military force: a nation is entitled to meet force with force; when a nation is attacked, it is

entitled to reply. But must it also rebuild, rehabilitate, reconstruct? What is the ethical claim here? When the Allies had pulverized the regimes of Adolf Hitler and the Japanese—as it was entirely right and proper for them to do, with the totality of their military force—were they then under an obligation to rebuild Germany and Japan? Many people, like Secretary of the Treasury Henry Morgenthau, Jr., wanted them turned into pastureland, returned to abject agricultural feudalism forever. The decision to reconstruct the two nations did not emerge from the just-war tradition; it was made on prudential, political grounds. Today, as in 1945, there is no strict, ethical obligation, but there is a prudential, political one, if the United States wants to build stability, in its own image. The intervention and state sovereignty commission tried to develop an ethical system that made the right to intervene correlative with an obligation to rebuild; that, we believed, is the way that the emerging, customary law of nations should go. But the case to rebuild Iraq is fundamentally not ethical but prudential—it is a smart thing to do, a smart investment of American power.

Democracy is always thought of as the antithesis of empire, but one of the dramas of American power in the twenty-first century is that empire has become a precondition for democracy. Neither democracy nor anything like the rule of law can be established in Afghanistan without a sustained, determined exercise of American imperial power. There is no chance at all that Iraq will emerge from forty years of authoritarianism to democracy and the rule of law without American imperial power. The United States was a democracy before it was an empire; now, suddenly, it is involved in places where the historical relationship is reversed. The nation faces a challenge that will test its own legitimacy as a democratic society—not simply to create stability, to order matters to suit its national interest, but to create institutions that represent the desire of local populations to rule themselves. Can it use imperial power to strengthen respect for self-determination, to give states back to the abused, oppressed people who deserve to rule them for themselves?