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The Curious Case of American Hegemony: Imperial Aspirations and National Decline

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Is there an American empire? Will it last? These two questions haunt the contemporary period. In the last few years, roughly since the enunciation of a new national security strategy in President Bush's West Point address in June 2002, hardly a day has passed without a news item, essay, or book announcing, denouncing, or contesting the existence of an American empire. Legions of journalists, activists, and professors have investigated the concept of empire, compared it with previous representations of the type, assessed how far the United States fits—or breaks—the mold, and employed it as a term of abuse or praise. From this outbreak of fascination with things imperial among the chattering classes no consensus emerged: opinions ranged from the view that the United States is an empire and has always been one to the view that the United States is not an empire and never was one. These terminological disputes arose partly from the genuine difficulty of finding a commonly agreed definition of the thing itself, but more importantly from the common appreciation that the "e" word bore closely on the legitimacy of the enterprise. There is also no consensus on the second question. One side insists that the United States has entered a "unipolar era" likely to last for several decades, the other that "the eagle has crash landed" and that its economic primacy is at an end. "In the first decade of the twenty-first century," writes the critic Michael Lind, "the Empire Bubble has succeeded the Tech Bubble and will look as absurd in hindsight in a decade or two."

These debates over American empire merged and overlapped with longstanding disputes among political scientists over the character of the contemporary international system, the sources of power within it, and its most important vectors of change. Is the international system unipolar or multipolar, or some combination of the two? Does military power still rule

the roost, or is the international system a complex multilevel chessboard with other and equally important sources of power and authority? In the current system, are states more likely to balance against or bandwagon with American power?

The debates over empire also merged and overlapped with longstanding controversies over the sources of decline and renewal of U.S. power within the international system, such as that prosecuted by the Yale historian Paul Kennedy and the Harvard political scientist Joseph Nye in the late 1980s. Analysts working in this vein understood the American predicament in grand strategic terms and were attentive to the gap that Walter Lippmann made famous—that is, the potential disjunction in a democracy between the ends and means of national strategy. Here the focus of the inquiry is the relationship between power and commitments, usually informed by the precept that the nation must "maintain its objectives and its power in equilibrium, its purposes within its means and its means equal to its purposes, its commitments related to its resources and its resources adequate to its commitments."

Both these persistent debates, the one over the sources of power in the international system, the other over the quest for solvency in national strategy, were renewed and transformed by the Bush Doctrine. The emergence of explicit imperial aspirations in the world's only superpower was in its own way as surprising and transformative as the collapse of the Soviet Union. In the early 1990s, the United States was generally deemed unlikely to chase after any imperial temptations. Despite the impressive military primacy that emerged by default after the Soviet collapse, most observers had generally shared the image of the United States as a conservative power oriented to the maintenance of the status quo, more likely to withdraw from the world than to dominate it.

This expectation also conditioned many debates among political scientists during the 1990s. Neither the "offensive realism" of the University of Chicago's John Mearsheimer nor the "liberal institutionalism" of Duke University's Robert Keohane expected the United States to take up the white man's burden and seek through force a revolutionary reconstruction of Middle Eastern governments. Surely the United States would realize that it should content itself with regional hegemony and not attempt an impossible march to global hegemony, thought Mearsheimer. Surely the

United States would appreciate the rational advantages offered by leadership in international institutions, thought Keohane.

Bush broke out of these constraints and created a new reality every bit as revolutionary for world politics, and just as disturbing for conventional paradigms in political science, as the Soviet collapse. The new outlook was well expressed by a senior Bush administration official in a conversation with a journalist in the summer of 2002. People in the "reality-based community," the aide said, "believe that solutions emerge from your judicious study of discernible reality.... That's not the way the world really works anymore. We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you're studying that reality—judiciously, as you will—we'll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that's how things will sort out. We're history's actors...and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do." This statement subsequently was held up to great ridicule, particularly the bit about the "reality-based community," but there is little doubt that this senior administration official spoke a fundamental truth when he said that "when we act, we create our own reality," and that the rest of us are left to follow in its wake.

As the senior administration official suggested, the Bush Doctrine is indeed an imperial program, one that must be placed on the ideological terrain of "universal empire." Critics, it may be conceded, are perfectly irrelevant to its trajectory, but they may find busy-work in soberly addressing its prospects. I shall take up that rather inglorious task by examining the empire via a bodily analogy—inquiring into its mind (the coherence of the Bush strategic outlook); its arms (the uses and limits of military power); its legs (the sustainability of the Bush economic program); the rottenness or sweetness of its heart (the perceived legitimacy of America's justifications); and the energy imparted by its breath (the influence of political culture on U.S. external conduct).

The general thesis is that imperial aspirations produce national decline, and this in both the material and moral realms. Achieving strategic solvency and moral legitimacy, to put the point in policy terms, requires the rejection of universal empire. Despite the weaknesses induced or exposed by the imperial strategy, the United States also enjoys certain intrinsic strengths that make its position far from irretrievable if it were to reject the imperial vision. What was long said of Russia—"not as strong as she seems, not as weak as she looks"—is also true of America.

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