

AMERICA'S IMPERIAL DILEMMA: POLITICAL ORDER V. GLOBAL INSURGENCY

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The United States is hanging on the horns of a dilemma that has confronted all empires in history. Like past empires, the United States provides international order in its self-interest and to exercise and earn authority over other peoples. Its leadership and the resulting *Pax Americana* are essential to peace and prosperity in the world today. We would all be impoverished were this leadership and order to decline. Much as Rome and its imperial order eventually gave way to the “Dark Ages,” the waning of the American empire would also likely mean the end of globalization, a curtailing of the international division of labor that has fueled growth since 1945, and greater interstate and intrastate conflict. Although we take it for granted today, international order--even civilization--is never unidirectional or a teleological process.

Yet, in providing order, the United States makes itself the inevitable target of global insurgents who oppose its rule. In the impossible task of crushing dissidents, the United States is propelled into all corners of the globe. Suppressing a global insurgency is like a mirage, always on the horizon but never within reach. President Barak Obama’s renewed war in Afghanistan is not unsound on its own terms, but is simply one more wasted step towards the ever elusive goal of stamping out opposition to the American empire.

By definition there is no easy solution to America’s imperial dilemma. Order is necessary in world affairs, but it provokes resistance that cannot in a global age ever be thoroughly

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defeated. The new administration's current effort in Afghanistan may well work, but without any long term effect. Instead, the United States must radically rethink its imperial ambitions and develop a global counter-insurgency strategy to win the hearts and minds of moderates around the world.

The American Empire

For over a century the United States has been extending its political authority over ever more countries. This has produced an "empire lite," as Michael Ignatieff terms it, or an "empire by invitation," as Geir Lundstad famously described it. In a series of bilateral relationships, often left implicit, the United States provides a degree of political order for subordinate countries that guarantees their security both internally and externally. This guarantee, in turn, permits subordinates to spend less on national defense and engage in higher levels of international trade and exchange than non-subordinates. These are the benefits of life within the American empire. In return, America's subordinates grant it a measure of legitimate authority over their security and economic policies -- euphemistically called "leadership."

The rules of international order matter. The *Pax Sovietica* differed dramatically from the *Pax Americana*, as did the *Pax Germanica* that flourished briefly during the 1930s and early 1940s. Writing the rules of order, in turn, has greatly benefited the United States. The American order is fundamentally a liberal order, privileging private property, economic openness, and -- when consistent with the first two goals -- political freedom within countries. Even though the order is biased toward American interests and values, subordinate countries still gain relative to their next best alternative, usually understood as a state-of-nature in which, as political philosopher Thomas Hobbes described it, life is "nasty, brutish, and short." Subordinates may

also benefit relative to other possible international orders, accounting for the flight of East Europeans from the Soviet to the American spheres-of-influence. Skewed to benefit the United States though it may be, the *Pax Americana* has created zones of peace and prosperity across wide swaths of the globe. In exchange, subordinate countries have ceded varying degrees of authority to Washington over their foreign security and economic policies, giving up the freedom to ally with whoever their might choose, opening their economies to American firms, and joining the United States in its wars.

Starting in 1898, the United States built an informal empire in states bordering on the Caribbean. Fearing that bankruptcy brought on by financial and political mismanagement might create opportunities for European creditors to meddle in America's self-proclaimed backyard, President Theodore Roosevelt asserted to great fanfare and little opposition an "international police power" over the states of the region. The United States intervened over 30 times in the next three decades to keep the members of its informal empire in line. This pattern ended only with the Franklin Delano Roosevelt's Good Neighbor Policy, which rather than being the antithesis of his cousin's corollary was actually a signal of Washington's success in establishing its authority. After World War II, challenges arose mostly from the communist-supported left, which brought forth new interventions in Cuba -- including the Bay of Pigs fiasco (1961), the Dominican Republic (1965), and Central America (under Reagan in the 1980s).

Starting about the same time, the United States also began enforcing a sphere-of-influence over all of the Western Hemisphere, calling into existence the doctrine first articulated by President James Monroe in 1823. Although permitting them more autonomy than countries on the Caribbean littoral, the United States nonetheless prohibited South Americans from allying

with great powers other than itself. Despite opposition and contestation as subordinates periodically struggled over the scope of U.S. Authority over their affairs, this informal empire in the Caribbean and sphere-of-influence in South America have proven remarkably robust.

Similarly, in the aftermath of World War II, the United States expanded its authority into Western Europe and Northeast Asia. In West Germany and Japan, it created an informal empire through which it regulated both the security and economic policies of its rehabilitated opponents. In the rest of these two regions, it led at least spheres-of-influence in which other states were prohibited from cooperating with the Soviet Union, or even remaining neutral in the postwar struggle. Through the end of the Cold War, the United States placed clear limits on the foreign policy autonomy of its so-called allied and, even today, maintains expectations that they will actively support it even in “out of area” wars -- an expectation confirmed by the outrage of many Americans toward France and Germany when they opposed the Iraq War in 2003.

In the 1990s, the United States attempted to expand its authority once again into new areas. In one of the greatest unappreciated initiatives in history, the United States sought to take its empire global after the Cold War -- with only mixed success. Mirroring the strategy and outcomes adopted in the West decades earlier, the United States offered East Europeans a sphere-of-influence. Fearing Russian revanchism, many East European states have eagerly embraced this opportunity in hopes of cementing even informal security guarantees. Some have even sought more hierarchical relationships by offering their territories for American missile defense systems.

The United States also expanded its footholds in the Persian Gulf. Washington has long been interested in expanding its influence in this region, overthrowing Prime Minister

Mohammed Mosaddeq in Iran in 1953 when he threatened to nationalize foreign oil firms, supporting the Shah of Iran in the 1970s through the Nixon Doctrine, and building an informal security relationship with Saudi Arabia that included constructing bases to American military specifications and pre-positioning equipment. In 1990, Iraq's invasion of Kuwait provided an opportunity for the United States to bolster its authority. Owing its existence to Washington's efforts, Kuwait has become an American imperial outpost in the gulf. Saudi Arabia's long-standing subordination to the United States became manifest as Washington seized control over the war and subsequent relations with Iraq. Following 9/11, the United States overthrew the Taliban in Afghanistan and Saddam Hussein in Iraq, creating first formal and later informal empires over both states. Nonetheless, the authority of the United States over the Gulf states remains insecure. Facing tremendous opposition at home, even regimes highly dependent on Washington refuse to acknowledge the authority of the United States over their affairs. Harmid Karsai, President of Afghanistan, and Nouri al-Maliki, Prime Minister of Iraq, are both seeking to secure their own rule by publicly staking out a more independence stance against the United States, even while they remain dependent on U.S. troops and goodwill. The political dominance of the United States in the region is still disputed.

Global Insurgency

Empire, even in lite form, always provokes dissent because it constrains the autonomy of individuals and states subject to the authority of the dominant state. The international order provided by the United States makes Washington and, in turn, Americans targets of disaffected groups who oppose the political and economic liberalism embodied in the *Pax Americana*. Economic losers from globalization, nationalists, and Islamists who distain Western secularism

have formed political coalitions in virtually every Muslim country. These protectionist-nationalist-religious blocs are especially prominent in Persian Gulf states. Some dissidents organize to compete in the electoral arena, and where successful, as in Iran, they seize the instruments of state power. Others, especially in autocratic regimes that block popular participation, turn to revolution and violence to bring about political change. It was no coincidence, one might say, that 15 of the 19 hijackers on 9/11 were from Saudi Arabia. Wielding at least partial authority over regimes in the region, and with many regimes dependent on continued U.S. support, the United States automatically becomes a target of violent groups seeking to overturn the existing political system. As the American empire has gone global, so has the insurgency against its rule.

Establishing authority is never easy. U.S. authority over states on the Caribbean littoral was highly contested, requiring what we would now call many “statebuilding” episodes to achieve success. Asserting new authority over Western Europe and Northeast Asia was possible only in the wake of two devastating world wars. The attempt to expand U.S. authority into the Persian Gulf has been met with controversy and considerable resistance. With very different histories and social preferences, opponents have risen up against the United States throughout the region. What differs in this case, however, is the scale of the opposition, united by a common Islamist identity, and the new technologies of global terrorism, which allow dissidents to reach from the imperial periphery far into the core. Together these factors combine to create a global insurgency against the United States and its client regimes. After 9/11 there was a debate in the United States whether “they” hate us “for who we are,” as conservatives alleged, or “for what we do,” as liberals retorted. The truth is both. By advancing its authority into a new region of the

world, the United States has provoked a global insurgency against its rule. The United States has become, as Osama bin Laden described it, the “far enemy.”

It will be impossible to rout out all insurgents who have taken up arms against the American empire. Indeed, the United States cannot even secure itself within its own borders from domestic or international terrorists, never mind track down and kill insurgents in the far corners of the globe. Moreover, in seeking to destroy insurgents, the United States inevitably becomes more deeply implicated in local politics and disputes and invariably creates collateral damage. Through a military counter-insurgency campaign, the United States risks becoming an even greater target of an ever growing class of insurgents. As critics have long pointed out, the global war on terror is a war without end.

Importantly, as in any empire, the need to rout insurgents inevitably creates imperial over-stretch as dissidents are pursued further into an ill-controlled periphery. As every imperial state since the dawn of history has discovered, defending the empire requires a permanent offensive. Anywhere insurgents can hide is a possible threat. Organizing just beyond the empire’s horizon, new “marcher lords” as they were once known arise to assault the center, requiring that the empire expand its area of control yet further. Afghanistan is one of the most remote and undeveloped countries on earth. If the United States today is unsafe because the Taliban once gave refuge to al Qaeda and the corruption and incompetence of the Karzai regime has created an opening for the Taliban to return to power, any unpoliced area of the globe is a threat. Even if President Obama succeeds in stabilizing a pro-Western regime in Afghanistan, which seems increasingly unlikely, insurgents will simply move from the Afghan-Pakistan border region to Somalia, Sudan, Chad or any other unstable country. The ungoverned expanses are indeed

expansive even today. The logical conclusion of an imperial strategy is to try to pacify and civilize all corners of the globe -- a fool's errand that has ultimately defeated not the insurgents but all previous empires. Today's insurgents can simply bleed the United States dry as it chases them from one global trouble spot to the next.

Even if the United States succeeds in Iraq and Afghanistan, the quest for security against a global insurgency must ultimately fail. If it were only one country that needed pacification and stabilization, the United States might possibly prevail at a cost American taxpayers are willing to pay. But the American empire knows no bounds against a global insurgency. Beyond Afghanistan, there will always be another horizon that draws the United States inevitably outwards. The global war can only dissipate resources and bankrupt the United States.

True dilemmas exist when there are irreconcilable tensions between valued goals. In the case of the American empire, authority and order are necessary for global peace and prosperity. The American empire, lite or invited though it may be, has created order and unprecedented prosperity for its members. Its decline would greatly increase conflict and reduce the welfare of Americans and others alike. Yet, the United States is now threatened by a global insurgency that it can never defeat. To pursue the insurgents wherever they hide is to guarantee imperial overstretch. There is no solution to this imperial dilemma.

Statebuilding as Imperial Strategy

The United States today is attempting to manage the imperial dilemma by building strong, effective, pro-Western states that can police their own territories and populations. Despite differences in rhetoric, tone, and the new focus on Afghanistan, there has been no significant change in this imperial strategy between the administrations of Presidents George W. Bush and

Barack Obama. Unfortunately, statebuilding simply reproduces the imperial dilemma on a smaller scale -- and does nothing to address the larger dilemma of the ever receding horizon.

Since the end of the Cold War, the United States has engaged in new efforts to build effective states both in its traditional informal empire (e.g., Haiti) and beyond (e.g., Bosnia, Somalia), with mixed success. In each case, a major rationale was to avoid an internal anarchy in which insurgents could hide. Since 2001, the United States has engaged in various statebuilding efforts in and around the Persian Gulf. In Afghanistan and Iraq, the United States first toppled regimes it opposed and then failed to consolidate control, creating its own failed states that then became battlegrounds in the global insurgency. In Iraq, after several years of denying responsibility, the United States finally recognized in 2007 that a major statebuilding effort was necessary, which has been carried out under the so-called Surge. President Obama has made statebuilding in Afghanistan his most important foreign policy initiative.

In Iraq and Afghanistan, the United States is pursuing similar statebuilding strategies, codified in the new *Army/Marine Counterinsurgency Field Manual*. It first commits new American troops to create a political space in which a new regime can consolidate its control over the country. After quelling the violence and training local troops, it then aims to “sub-contract” the maintenance of political order to national police and military forces, reserving for itself an emergency intervention role to assist its local partners when necessary. As articulated in the new *Army/Marine field manual on counter-insurgency warfare*, in conjunction with local authorities, the United States also provides necessary public services to the population to undercut support for the insurgents. Winning the “hearts and minds” of moderates is expected to produce useful intelligence on insurgents in the area, who can then be tracked down and

destroyed. This national-level strategy of creating political order in return for legitimacy parallels that used by the United States to secure its own authority within its empire.

In both states, however, the United States seeks not only to build strong states but also loyal states that will remain within its sphere-of-influence. Herein lies the source of the state-level dilemma. Relying on hand picked local leaders who are sympathetic to its aspirations, the United States hopes to rally the population around a centrist program that aligns with its preferences for economic and political liberalism. In Iraq, the United States anointed Maliki and, in Afghanistan, Karzai. Since average Iraqis and Afghans do not yet share America's same preferences, these local proxies can only stay in power only with continued U.S. support and, importantly, by non-democratic means or electoral fraud, as witnessed most recently in the Afghan presidential elections. This is an effective way of maintaining control over a subordinate government. But with the political order lacking broad-based societal support, the state remains weak. The United States is compelled to prop up the leader and tolerate political practices it abhors, including corruption, favoritism, and blatant electoral manipulation.

The resulting political order is, thus, created by the United States and subsequently led by a leader who is sympathetic to American policy and sufficiently weak that he cannot deviate too far from Washington's wishes. Yet, by creating an internal order biased towards its own interests and principles, the United States ends up undermining its authority and stimulating new insurgents. Unless there is already broad-based support for the United States--which exists in the Persian Gulf only in Kuwait, a legacy of the 1991 war--one can have effective states perceived as legitimate by their own people or compliant states loyal to the United States, but not both. By

trying to have it both ways, the United States cannot build strong states able to police themselves and their people.

Even if statebuilding works in a single country, however, it does nothing to solve the larger imperial dilemma of the constantly receding horizon. If the United States succeeds in subduing Afghanistan, insurgents will just move into Pakistan and destabilize that country, as they did immediately after the American invasion in 2001. If the United States then intervenes in Pakistan to subdue its wild Northwest frontier areas, which have never been governed by either the British empire or Islamabad, insurgents will simply move again to the next trouble spot. The strategy of stabilizing one area and then moving to the next will eventually need to cover the entire globe.

Retreat from Empire?

If America's imperial dilemma is unsolvable, "what is to be done?" -- to quote V.I. Lenin, who certainly understood problems of empire and how to exploit them. One option, of course, is to "come home" and abandon empire entirely. But this is a Siren's call: compelling, seductive, and ultimately disastrous. But an imperial retrenchment -- including withdrawing from the Persian Gulf -- is increasingly necessary.

A world without order would certainly be more dangerous than even the one we inhabit today. The United States is a target of a global insurgency, but it is precisely because the order it supports is so strong and so beneficial to so many that opponents cannot seek to win through normal political channels but must take up arms against it. Were order to decay, violence would explode and the wheels of international commerce would grind to a halt. To point to a salient but extreme example, Somali pirates or their equivalents would not be a rarity but commonplace. Or

without the Federal Reserve Bank and U.S. Treasury as lenders of last resort, global finance would collapse, as it nearly did in 2008. Although after 60 years the American order is sufficiently taken for granted that we often do not see it, its absence would have a profound effect on global security and the global economy. To abandon the American empire without some supranational replacement, unlikely in our lifetimes, would be foolish.

This said, the Middle East in general and the Persian Gulf in particular may be a “bridge to far” for the American empire. Although the gains from integrating the Middle East into the *Pax Americana* would be huge, the costs of doing so may be insurmountable, or at least far beyond anything American taxpayers are willing to pay. Although the United States ultimately succeeded in extending a degree of imperial control over the Western Hemisphere, it took nearly 30 years to establish its authority. Western Europe and Northeast Asia were happy by-products of global wars fought for other reasons. Contemporary Americans are unlikely to support the effort necessary to pacify the globe. As British economic historian Niall Ferguson has written, they simply “lack the imperial cast of mind.”

The United States actually has few vital interests in the Middle East. The opposite, of course, is often taken as an article of faith in Washington, but this assumption should be critically examined. The Middle East’s primary resource, oil, is available from other countries in other regions. Of the 25 largest oil producing states in the world, accounting for nearly 99 percent of global production (2005), only eight are in the Middle East (35 percent of global production) and only six in the Persian Gulf (30 percent). While Americans worry about security of supply, it is as much in the interests of oil producers to sell their output as it is in the interests of consumers to buy it. Finally, price manipulation by OPEC is a possibility, but with what we now know about

global climate change countries everywhere ought to be raising the price of oil to reduce consumption anyways. As journalist Thomas Friedman has frequently argued, the United States should sharply tax oil imports to both reduce carbon emissions and break the backs of petro-states who use their proceeds to exploit their own people, fight foreign wars, and support terrorists. Cheap oil is not a necessity but a long term threat to global welfare and America's interests. The American empire in the Middle East is a choice, not a requirement for future prosperity.

Even if abandoning the American empire is not entirely feasible, a radical retrenchment from the Middle East is possible and, indeed, prudent. Like Britain in 1968, the United States can and should withdraw "East of Suez." The United States took advantage of the end of the Cold War to deepen and expand its empire in the Persian Gulf. Doing so was an act of imperial hubris. To preserve the empire it already has, it should retrench and withdraw from the region.

A Global Counter-Insurgency Strategy

The new Army/Marine field manual places winning hearts and minds at the center of counter-insurgency strategy. This requires protecting the people from harm, providing the public services they need, and ultimately earning their loyalty. In getting out of fortified bases and patrolling the streets, the field manual acknowledges that soldiers must place themselves at greater risk. The new strategy appears to be working in Iraq since it was implemented in 2007, and is being rolled out in Afghanistan with as yet unclear effect. Now framed as advice and guidance for battlefield commanders, the United States needs to generalize this strategy to the diplomatic chessboard as well.

The United States remains an enormous beacon of hope for peoples around the world. Although its image has been sullied by human rights abuses after 9/11 and the doctrine of preventive unilateralism of the Bush administration, it continues to attract the aspirations of many moderates around the globe. Political scientist and diplomat Joseph Nye terms this America's "soft power." The famous German sociologist Max Weber termed it charismatic authority. The ideals and generally enlightened policies of the United States have been an important foundation of its empire. Its own history of anti-colonialism as well as its internal democracy and checks and balances have made it a relatively benign foreign ruler and drawn others voluntarily into its empire. If it holds to its ideals and benign practices, it can once again win the hearts and minds of peoples around the world.

More actively, the United States must re-embrace multilateralism. To grant authority to another state is one of the most profound acts any country or people can make. Countries do so only when they believe the dominant state will exercise its authority fairly and in the general interest. America's history and ideals have assured subordinates of its generally good intentions, but as the reaction to 9/11 and the Iraq War showed, these self-imposed fetters can be easily thrown off. Multilateralism as practiced with Europe after 1945 and more generally in the 1990s provided an additional check and balance on the United States. Although many conservatives decried the constraints on American policy imposed by multilateralism, they were and remain central to the success of the American empire. We must retie the suzerain's hands.

In addition, to win the hearts and minds of moderates in the developing world who must want to join the American empire in the future, the United States should significantly expand efforts at political and economic development. Aid must go to the people whose hearts we want

to win rather than corrupt leaders whom we have already bought. Societies moving to embrace the practices of the American sphere by routing out corruption, reforming markets, and expanding democracy ought to be rewarded generously, both to encourage further progress and signal others of the benefits that await them. Pulling back from empire and retrenching our military forces will more than enable the dramatic increases in foreign aid necessary to teach this aim. Even Secretary of Defense Robert Gates has advocated shifting money from the Pentagon to Foggy Bottom to enhance aid and development programs. The United States must become part of the solution to the problem of global economic and political development.

Finally, like its frontline troops, the American people must accept that the world is a dangerous place, and that a degree of risk is inherent in leading its empire. In a global insurgency, absolute security is a mirage, always on the horizon but never approachable. The end of the Cold War and the winding down of the nuclear arms race permitted Americans to believe they could escape existential threats and that security could be assured. The shattering of this illusion in 9/11 and the fear it evoked stoked the preventive war doctrine of the Bush administration. Nonetheless, the imperial dilemma persists. Order is necessary to peace and prosperity, but to rule others inevitably provokes opposition and, sometimes, insurgency. The effort to eliminate militarily all insurgents draws the United States into endless conflicts in distant recesses of the globe. Iraq leads to Afghanistan which leads to Pakistan and then beyond. The imperial periphery in which insurgents can hide is always just over the horizon, and insurgents can and will strike the United States. Americans must recognize that to enjoy the benefits of their imperial order, not only their troops but they themselves must inevitable bear

some risk. This is not a happy conclusion, obviously, but to think otherwise is to endlessly chase the mirage.