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The American Mission

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We, the American people, have reached the end of a two-and-a-half-century crusade that defined us and changed the world as profoundly as any event in history. For a quarter of a millennium, we fought empires. Now, those empires are gone--every one--and we do not know what to do with ourselves. Our present enemies are vicious, but small. They cannot excite us to a new national purpose. The United States is suffering from victory.

Pentagon officials struggle to justify the purchase of \$350 billion worth of unnecessary aircraft, while our diplomats sleepwalk through atrocity and our foreign policy is an incoherent shambles. None of our outward-looking institutions has grasped the dimensions of change. We need to break 250 years of habits we did not even realize we had. Our national cause, never articulated or even consciously realized, was to break the imperial hierarchies that held mankind in bondage. In 1989, as the last and worst of the old empires fell, we won a complete victory, and found ourselves unprepared for the fractured world the struggle left behind.

The verities and cherished villains are gone, and we have entered an age of small-scale evils. We crave a great, new American mission, and policy circles feel confusion and malaise in the new threat vacuum. The mightiest American foreign policy tradition is gone--a tradition that predated our existence as a country. We are a people formed in opposition, and that opposition was always to empire. Now there is no mightiness to oppose, no galvanizing evil, but only hard-to-locate countries where bloody shreds of mankind butcher neighbors.

We began under English dominion, opposing the French empire in a struggle that culminated in the mid-18th century. If America's independence began at Lexington and Concord, it found its inspiration on the Plains of Abraham before Quebec, where colonial militiamen learned how easily an empire might fall. Next, we fought the greatest empire of the age, Britain itself, to champion the political and economic rights of man. A first war drove the British out, while a second confirmed their relegation to the Canadian margins of our continent.

Then we fought the Mexican empire and cut it in half. Our subsequent Civil War was an internal purge, cleansing from our soil the last European notions of hereditary authority and human subjugation. It was an Americanizing bloodbath that ended the first phase of our anti-imperial struggle, consolidating the physical shape of the United States we know.

The second phase of our crusade began with the Spanish-American War, a globe-spanning conflict whose brevity and relative lack of suffering have always obscured its importance. This time, we not only defeated a European empire, but destroyed it. It was not a local revolution against colonial overlords, but an international assault upon colonial possessions. No matter that Spain's imperium was little more than a carcass--this was a watershed in history, the death knell for the old European empires. The Spanish-American War was noteworthy, too, because it was our first war against a distant "evil empire." Spain's treatment of its Cuban and other colonial subjects both moved us and gave us an excuse to grasp its treasures. It proved an addictive model.

Japan observed the low price we paid, then emulated us half a dozen years later, when it attacked the other decayed European empire with dominions in East Asia, the Czar's Russia. Japan won brilliantly, then launched itself as an upstart empire that would end 40 years later, in humiliation, on the deck of an American battleship.

The First World War was a conflict of discontents that were not ours, a hacking off of Europe's diseased limbs by the afflicted body itself. That great European civil war fatally weakened the remaining empires, while spawning new ones.

America's late entry aligned us against three more empires: the Second Reich of Germany, Austria-Hungary, and the Ottoman Empire. Although we hardly engaged the latter two, we guaranteed their destruction.

In the Second World War, America saved the world from unspeakable tyrannies. This is an unfashionable, but absolutely accurate way of putting it. For all the valor of crumpled Britain and agonized Russia, the United States decided the outcome. In doing so, we destroyed the Japanese and Nazi-German empires, as well as the operetta empire of Fascist Italy. Fatally weakened, the British and French empires collapsed of their own weight after the war. Only the Soviet incarnation of the Russian empire, a domain of figurative and literal darkness, remained to represent the imperial idea of human subjugation.

In 1945, we found ourselves guarantors of a world we barely knew. It is not surprising that we made tragic mistakes, but that we made so few. During the Cold War, the complexity of our struggle increased. The force of arms proved weaker than the force of ideas--ours or theirs. In Korea, then Vietnam, we found ourselves engaged with a grisly empire of ideology. Yet, the populations against whom we fought were fighting their own anti-imperial struggles. The United States fought anti-imperial wars against anti-imperialists fighting to expand a totalitarian empire. The Cold War was an age of paradox and moral erosion--as dark as it was cold--overshadowed by the ever-present threat of nuclear cataclysm.

At the end of this last struggle, those who believed that man should govern himself from below had defeated those who believed that man must be governed from above. In that sense, 1989 marked the end not of a mere quarter millennium of human history, but the climax of man's entire previous history of governance. Certainly, many a local tyranny remains around the world, but they will not prosper. The future belongs to citizens who control their own governments. All else is a vestige.

When the Berlin Wall fell, we were triumphant and at a loss. We opened the door to mankind's future, but closed the door on who we had been for so long. Along the way, we had become an empire ourselves, if of an unprecedented kind. Ours is an empire of culture and economic power, not of military occupation and physical enslavement. Nonetheless, the nation that defined itself as David has become the last Goliath.

We destroyed the old world, but lack a useful vision for a new order. Since 1989, too much of humanity has failed to live up to our ennobling rhetoric. Our victory over the last of the old empires unleashed forces we failed to anticipate, the zealous butchers wrapped in religion and ethnicity. Perhaps all that is left to us is a long minding of brute children.

We destroyed or helped destroy 11 empires in this 250-year epoch, while the remaining few--Portuguese, Dutch, Belgian--died of decay. The fundamental difficulty remaining, apart from mankind's innate tendencies, is that those empires twisted the world into unnatural shapes. Although the empires are gone, the treacherous boundaries they established remain. Empires drew borders based not upon popular preference or human affinities, but as a result of conflicts, competition, and compromise with other empires. Often, borders were defined in ignorance of local affairs or even of geographical detail. Lines inked--or sometimes crayoned--upon a map determined the fate of millions. Those borders remain a plague upon our times.

The United States, history's most powerful force for human liberation, now finds itself in a perverse and ill-considered position. Due to inertia and the fears of bureaucrats, we have slipped into the role of defending inherited, utterly dysfunctional imperial borders. Our Department of State, administrations drawn from both parties, lawyers, and academics all oppose "violations of sovereignty" and even the most logical and necessary amendments to borders. Future historians will be amazed at America's actions across the past decade. One administration initially tried to convince the Soviet Union to remain together, while successive administrations opposed the breakup of Yugoslavia, an entity as unnatural as any cobbled-together state could be. In our addiction to stasis and our obsession--for it is nothing less than that--with "inviolable" interstate boundaries carved out by imperial force in a different age, we are putting ourselves on the side of the empires we destroyed. America thoughtlessly supports oppression because we find the lines on the map familiar and convenient. The ghosts of kaisers, kings, and czars must be howling with glee in hell.

We must rethink this blind and destructive policy. Instead of using our might in vain attempts to force those who hate one another to live together--our "no-divorce" approach to foreign policy--we should lead the way in developing

mechanisms to amend borders peacefully--or as peacefully as possible. Of course this will be difficult to do, for many of those in power profit from the present arrangement, and the sufferings of the powerless do not move them. And justice will be relative, for the redefinition of many borders will involve population transfers: even when statistically just, such changes will prove unfair to many individuals. Amending borders is not a formula for a perfect world, only an approach to improve the present one and lessen slaughter.

The alternative is ethnic cleansing, genocide, and violence without end. We cannot force a man to love his neighbor. And, most important, redrawn borders and population transfers work. Those conducted at the end of World War II in Europe resulted in the longest period of peace in European history--until the disintegration of Yugoslavia, where borders had *not* changed.

Certainly the least mention of just borders will bring howls from every scruffy dictatorship in the United Nations. But should the nation that changed human history for the better and shattered the imperial model quake at the protests of Balkan thugs, African strongmen, or Asian authoritarians?

Of course, it will not be possible to impose effective changes in every case. Strategic interests will have their due, while some demands for independence arise only from a minority of the championed minority. At times, the ethnic mixing will be too complex, the claims too layered and contradictory. And in some cases the local populations will still have to settle their differences in blood. There will be no universal formula for success. Each case will have its own dilemmas. Yet, who believes that the present system is functional, or acceptable, or decent? As we prepare to enter a new millennium, it is time to discard those foolish prejudices that have come to pass for wisdom in world affairs. Bad borders will change. The only question is how those changes will occur.

Our American mission is not over. Although it is ever a temptation to withdraw from this troubled world and celebrate our own wealth and comfort, isolation is an impossible dream. The world is now too much of a piece, its interlocking systems too complex and binding. American interests are everywhere, or nearly so. We are condemned to work for global betterment.

This does not mean our current penchant for plunging thoughtlessly into random crises that happen to get our attention is a wise one, or that we must engage always and everywhere. On the contrary, a consideration both of where our greatest national interests lie and of what is actually achievable (and affordable) should always shape our web of policies--economic, diplomatic, and military. But there are two worthy goals that we might bear in mind:

First comes the practical matter of borders. We must either foster the creation of mechanisms to fix those that do not work or at least side with those seeking self-determination and not with dying, repressive regimes that cling to every inch of their "sovereign" territory. This world is changing, whether we like it or not. A fundamental change is occurring in the forms, shapes, and sizes of statehood, reflecting national downsizing in the aftermath of empire and the simultaneous development of transnational modes of cooperation. Although horrified diplomats and professors declare the impossibility of changing borders, they are wrong. Borders are already changing, from Colombia's internal borders to the inevitable independence of Kosovo, from Central Africa to Indonesia. Our current position is at best naïve. Because we do not support the legitimate aspirations of other human beings to live peaceably among those for whom they feel a natural affinity, we find ourselves time and again on the wrong side of history. It is time to come to our senses and lead the way to freedom once again.

The second worthy goal is support of universal human rights. The present Administration, despite its deplorable failure to pursue that goal, began with appealing rhetoric. Long after the glare of scandal has dulled, America's enduring support for monstrous dictatorships will fascinate those who study our history. The mechanics of the present Administration's failure were simple. Coming to office with a genuine desire, but not a commitment, to support human rights, the Administration quickly found that it owed too much to too many interest groups--support for human rights was not compatible with business or diplomatic convenience. Early on, during a meeting of the National Security Council staff, the decision was taken to "give" Burma/Myanmar to the human rights advocates to appease them--anathematizing it for its human rights record and banning new American investment--while continuing to conduct business as usual with more important states such as China and Saudi Arabia, where human rights abuses were and remain far worse.

Support for human rights need not involve constant engagement on all fronts, with US troops deployed each time a bully kicks a dog. Rather, we simply should consider this moral and practical factor when making diplomatic decisions. Strategic requirements will not always allow us to put human rights first in every case and country. But their consideration must never be fully absent. Further, dependable support for human rights--and a range of penalties for abusers--would bring our country both renewed respect and practical advantage. Respect for basic human rights forms the basis for both sound policy and good business. The partner state that respects the needs and aspirations of its own citizens is apt to be a dependable partner, but the dictator always comes down in the end.

We have too often been on the wrong side of a popular revolution. We no longer have even the excuse of Cold War polarities to explain our penchant for supporting oppressors. When the Russian government slaughtered tens of thousands of its own citizens in Chechnya, we hastened to assure Moscow of our unreserved friendship. In the Balkans, we cut deals with dictators time and again, only to watch the torrent of blood expand. In Indonesia, we clung to yesterday's corrupt regime even as the people pulled it down. Especially in the Middle East, we kowtow to regimes that oppress and abuse women, torment and even kill those of different faiths, and utterly reject democracy. These are inexplicable cases of the strong allowing the weak but intolerant to set the terms of engagement. We garner no respect, but are despised for our hypocrisy and fecklessness. We desecrate our heritage each day.

Americans attempt to defeat proposals they do not like by simplifying them to death. The propositions sketched above will be misinterpreted--purposely--as a call for sending in the Marines, or launching a quixotic global crusade, or even as supporting the bogeyman of world government. I advocate none of these things, but only an intelligent approach to change, a moral stance where one is possible, and a recognition that wishing away the desires of oppressed populations will not keep foreign borders intact.

As for sovereignty, it is the privilege of the just, successful state. Any state that butchers, or even oppresses, its own population forfeits any claim to sovereign rights. Recently, we heard repulsive arguments that attempts to stop mass murder and ethnic cleansing in Kosovo infringed on sovereign territory. By that logic, Hitler would have been acceptable had he killed only German Jews. States exist to protect and benefit their populations. That is the rationale for these United States. Shall other human beings be condemned in order to keep our atlases intact and embassy receptions on schedule?

If a state cannot control criminality, terrorism, or ecological devastation on its own territory and those problems adversely affect its neighbors--or the entire planet--may it still claim sovereignty? This is the argument of kings, not of the common man. At present, we pretend that ineffective or even criminal regimes are legitimate because we "know no other way." It is time to forge another way.

This world is one in which we cannot stand alone. While we must protect our own sovereignty, which is legitimate, earned, and beneficial to all, we must also recognize the need for teamwork. NATO served American interests well--and still does, despite that organization's need to evolve. The United Nations, pathetic, inept, and indispensable, has also brought us more advantages than disadvantages, from providing an umbrella for some necessary actions to giving discontented minor states the illusion of a voice. But NATO is a regional alliance, and will not span the globe. The United Nations remains ineffective in the clinch, not only because of its dreadful bureaucracy (which may, in fact, be a blessing, since it prevents the organization from doing much damage), but because it is too inclusive. No organization in which backward, vicious regimes, such as those of China or Russia, have veto power will change much of anything--least of all unjust borders, a digestive ailment from which both these gobblers of minorities suffer.

It is time to form a Union of Democratic Nations, of globe-spanning, like-minded states whose people live under the rule of law and choose their own leaders. We need a grand alliance that can act, diplomatically, economically and, when necessary, militarily, for global betterment. Such an alliance would include only true democracies, such as most European states, our own country, and others such as Japan, South Korea, Brazil, Argentina, Chile, Israel, South Africa, and the sturdy English-speaking states down under and to our north. It would exclude false democracies, such as Russia or Malaysia. Corrupt democracies and those in which religious prejudice or ethnic favor are dominant would also be excluded, until they reform. This would leave out for now India and Pakistan, Mexico and Nigeria. The purpose would be to unite in an alliance those states whose behavior has earned them the right to support positive

change in troubled regions.

It would also have to be an open alliance, in which a two-thirds majority and not unanimity would be required for action, and in which no member would be required to participate in a specific embargo or deployment against its will. It would, in short, be truly democratic and utterly voluntary. Such an alliance might even prove capable of timely action. At a minimum, it would be the richest, most powerful, and most desirable club in the world.

On the threshold of a new millennium, Americans can be proud. We have led the world a long way out of the darkness. But there are still miles to go. We destroyed the old hierarchies that wasted human aspirations and talents as surely as they squandered human blood. We broke the tradition of rule by fiat that stretched from Babylon to Moscow. It is hard not to see these United States as blessed and chosen.

We are very fortunate. And with good fortune comes responsibility. We are condemned to lead. This means we must stop clinging to the past, whether antiquated notions about the sacrosanct nature of a butcher's borders or the belief that what goes on beyond our neighbor's customs barrier does not concern us. It is not a matter of seeking "foreign entanglements," or compromising our own hard-won freedoms, but of doing what is best for ourselves, as well. A world in which men and women live freely and enjoy secure rights is the world in which our own greatness is likeliest to endure.

Ralph Peters (LTC, USA Ret.) is a novelist, essayist, and lecturer whose commentaries on military and strategic issues have appeared in a wide range of media outlets. His two most recent books, published in spring 1999, are *Traitor*, a novel about corruption in America's defense industry, and *Fighting for the Future*, a look at coming conflicts based upon his essays in *Parameters*.

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