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In Search of Monsters to Destroy: American Empire in the New Millennium

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“We have had an Imperial lesson; it may make us an Empire yet!”
— Rudyard Kipling¹

With the coldly calculated use of terror, the perpetrators of 11 September 2001 served abrupt notice of challenge to US global dominance. The seemingly easy path before Americans that had appeared to stretch out well into the 21st century—promising boundless economic growth, a worldwide embrace of US values, an absence of rivals—stood blocked by the rubble in New York and Washington. In tallying the costs buried within the debris of 9/11, Americans need to look beyond the lost lives and shattered dreams and recognize that defense of the empire they possess will not come cheaply. But first they must accept the fact of empire. Those who argue the United States has no empire to uphold whistle past the graveyard, ignoring the historically unparalleled confluence of political, economic, military, and information power that have come together in the American imperial construct. To a great extent, the United States holds sway over the world—or at least influence over much of it—an empire inviting admiration, envy, and, as with all empires before it, challenge.

John Quincy Adams warned in 1821 that Americans should resist the temptation of going abroad “in search of monsters to destroy.”² But in September 2001, monsters literally came to the United States, threatening political instability, economic malaise, and chaos. Even with al Qaeda on the run and Baghdad now fallen, the world remains dangerous and unstable, with vital US interests challenged by committed actors and unrelenting forces. North Korea pursues its nuclear ambition; Israelis and Palestinians remain locked in a death embrace; Islamic fundamentalists scheme to force the world back to the seventh century; Colombia teeters at the edge of failure; and the whole of the African continent stares

at virtual extinction occasioned by a plague of Biblical proportion. Only the United States has the capability to restore order, imposing its will when and where necessary. This imperial path holds danger and difficulty, but it is a choice the nation must embrace, even if reluctantly and at certain cost.

Taking up the Gauntlet

In September 2002, the Bush Administration released its carefully crafted National Security Strategy (NSS), affirmatively answering the question of whether the United States would meet the challenges posed by a disordered world, seemingly accepting the mantle and responsibility of empire. The Administration determined, not unreasonably, that the doctrines of containment and deterrence that had served the nation throughout the Cold War would not be effective in protecting Americans against asymmetric threats posed by irrational or ideologically motivated non-state actors or rogue states, foes who would be neither contained nor deterred.³ The new “Bush Doctrine” of preemption, as enunciated in the NSS, drew attention (and criticism) as proof that the United States would act unilaterally—indeed, with imperial “arrogance”—in defense of its interests.

If truth be told, preemption is not so radical a concept; at heart it is simply self-defense. Controversy lies, however, in the robust version of self-defense espoused in the NSS. Therein preemption has moved from the classic, internationally recognized “anticipatory self-defense” in the face of imminent danger to a flat assertion that the United States can even change regimes in order to obviate dangers not yet operational, as exemplified by the war against Iraq.⁴

But even “more ambitious than preemption is the sometimes overlooked assertion that the United States will remain powerful enough to keep potential adversaries from a military buildup that would surpass or equal the power of the United States.”⁵ Herein truly lies assertion of imperial prerogative: the United States will “have all the power and no one else shall have the capacity to provide a balance. . . . [It is a] declaration of absolute military supremacy throughout the globe.”⁶ Max Boot, senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, observes that this “predominance doctrine” reflects the American preference to go it alone, unconstrained by allies.⁷ Many in the world—the French come to mind—view the combination of preemption and predominance as insidious, an imperial overreach that goes beyond a war on terror to establish the United States not only as the world’s constable but as its final arbiter of state legitimacy.⁸

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The National Security Strategy seeks to soften such opposition with repeated assertions that the United States acts only with the most benevolent of motives: to “create a balance of power that favors human freedom: conditions in which all nations and societies can choose for themselves the rewards and challenges of political and economic freedom.”⁹ Such pieties are very likely neither convincing nor comforting to European or Chinese practitioners of *realpolitik* (nor to al Qaeda, for that matter), given the insistence in the NSS that the American vision of democratic governance and economic policy is the “single sustainable model for national success.”¹⁰ But they do serve to make empire palatable to a US populace that has “tended to reject the idea that our own high-minded republic might be imperial (much less imperialist) . . . [certain that Washington] did not seek to conquer territory nor, supposedly, to dominate other societies.”¹¹

It may be true that American dominion lacks many of the indicia of classic empire—the United States does not, for example, forcibly extract resources from colonies, impose its political values and institutions by force, or direct the foreign policies of client states.¹² While the operation in Iraq lends pause to the claim that the United States will not impose its values, as a general proposition America exercises its authority indirectly, preferring “seduction to coercion” (albeit perfectly prepared to use force as necessary), always with the goal of maintaining supremacy. As Andrew Bacevich notes, this preference “befits a nation founded on the conviction of its own uniqueness, [an] empire . . . like no other in history.”¹³ In sum, rigid academic classification should not deter “Americans [from] admitting the truth and facing up to their responsibilities as the undisputed masters of the world.”¹⁴

This American mastery comes in several forms. US economic might drives the world’s trade and markets and American political power can often shape the decisions of international bodies. In the 21st century, American “soft power” surely influences the course of human events, creating an enticing culture driven by US command of the information network. But that attractive velvet glove hides a mailed fist, the nexus of American power. The United States “has overwhelming superiority in military power, and uses that power to influence the internal behavior of other states, [acting as] an empire.”¹⁵ Televised images of American tanks rolling through the streets of Baghdad evinced the “centrality of military power to present-day American policy . . . to convey disap-

proval, change attitudes, and dictate behavior.”¹⁶ As one reviews current American military strategy and planning for the future, defense of empire, if not its expansion, seems a clear if unspoken objective.

A Ruling Capability

In the Cold War years, US military planning was “threat-based,” focused mainly on the specter of Soviet-bloc tanks racing through the Fulda Gap. With the collapse of the Soviet threat—and the subsequent seeming absence of any real threat at all—the military moved toward a “capabilities-based” posture, a shift in focus consistent with the 2002 National Security Strategy.¹⁷ A “threat-based” force was reactive and defensive in nature: the United States awaited the thrust. In contrast, a “capabilities-based” force carries with it an implication of offensive capability if not intent: the US focus is not on any particular threat as it prepares for any and all contingencies by adopting an aggressive, forward-leaning posture.

In *Joint Vision 2020*, the US military posits “Full Spectrum Dominance,” a doctrine that moves beyond fighting and winning conventional wars, past confronting weapons of mass destruction, to a particular attention to the “asymmetric threats—terrorists, criminals, religious crazies, two-bit strongmen with big ambitions, anarchy-minded hackers, and unscrupulous scientists peddling weapons secrets to make a buck.”¹⁸ This “capabilities-based” force provides policymakers with a suite of options to fight what Boot calls “the savage wars of peace . . . necessary to enlarge the ‘empire of liberty.’”¹⁹

The US ability to bend wills derives from several key elements, but perhaps the most important is the ubiquity of its presence worldwide, with “military bases, or base rights, in some 40 countries—giving it the same global muscle it would enjoy if it ruled those countries directly.”²⁰ The US footprint is innocuous in most cases (often treaty rights without a physical presence, except as needed), allowing for a light touch that minimizes local resentments. Next, the United States projects power and imperial influence through its Special Forces and intelligence capabilities. Since 9/11, the United States has quietly dispersed such forces worldwide, moving “deeply into the governments, intelligence agencies, and security apparatus of many countries . . . [with] small numbers of US forces ‘advising’ (i.e., commanding) native forces, . . . in effect usurping sovereignty.”²¹

The use of proxies is a time-honored tradition of empire: Bacevich devotes an entire chapter of his book *American Empire* to comparing US proxies fighting, inter alia, in Afghanistan, to the British employing Gurkhas during the time of the Raj. When Australian Prime Minister John Howard asserted his own nation’s right to strike preemptively (following the 12 October 2002 terror attacks in Bali), his alarmed Asian neighbors accused him of playing America’s “deputy sheriff” in Southeast Asia.²²

A rapid response capability, intelligence/information dominance, proxies, and air and naval power are all evolving components of American imperial power projection. That said, “lesson one in the Roman handbook for imperial

success would be a realization that it is not enough to have great military strength; the rest of the world must know that strength—and fear it.”²³ The war on terror, as the Administration has oft-noted, is being fought in the shadows, as it should be. But the war against Iraq has been front-page news for nearly all of 2003, dominating the world’s consciousness, underscoring the reality of American suzerainty. The willingness on the part of the United States to use credible and massive force against Saddam Hussein, as *The Washington Post* speculated on 13 April 2003, did more than topple a dictator: it served notice in Pyongyang, Tehran, and Damascus that Washington will remove those who threaten US interests.²⁴ That action is truly an exercise of imperial power, a “demonstration that the empire cannot be challenged with impunity.”²⁵

Shocked and Awed . . . by the Check

The image of Saddam’s statue tumbling from its pedestal brings with it a visceral satisfaction; the American psyche, scarred by 9/11, anthrax attacks, color-coded security alerts, economic woes, and a general sense of unease, restored to a confident, imperial swagger. Watch out, world! But the victory comes at a cost, and the bill has yet to be paid. As Boot noted in October 2002:

[As] impressive as the American military dominance of the past decade has been, it was acquired, relatively speaking, on the cheap. America spends only about 3.5 percent of its GDP on defense, down from 4.4 percent as recently as 1993 . . . but [now] there aren’t enough troops to carry out all our commitments, and the equipment they use is aging fast. . . . [N]ext year’s [2003] defense budget increase won’t begin to cover this shortfall. . . . If America is serious about remaining the Big Enchilida, it will have to spend more on defense.”²⁶

The expense of bases abroad, of massive deployments, of “full spectrum dominance,” is going to fall on the American taxpayer, with an economy still in the doldrums. In spending for imperial defense, the United States may shortchange domestic priorities for, as Michael Ignatieff observes, “What empires lavish abroad, they cannot spend on good republican government at home: on hospitals or roads or schools.”²⁷ To the defense bill, add also the cost of homeland security and, of course, the as-yet-uncalculated costs of Iraqi reconstruction.

The Romans, Ottomans, and British resolved this issue easily and brutally, through the imposition of imperial levies. The US approach, bowing to both domestic and international sensibilities, is of necessity subtler, based on the principle of what Norwegian historian Geir Lundestad has characterized as “empire by invitation.”²⁸ A good example is the arrangement that the United States has with Singapore, which agreed to pay for the construction of a naval facility that could accommodate American carriers. Singaporeans have now both an economic and security stake in the empire (not to mention plausible deniability, as they can claim that the facilities are open to any nation, even if the United States is the only likely occupant). While such direct subsidies are welcome, the costs of the imperial con-

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struct are in the last analysis defrayed on a grander scale, through globalization and a stable, open economic order that furthers, first and foremost, American prosperity. This is the aim US power ultimately means to impose and protect.

Non, Nyet, Nein

In addition to the economic accounting, there is also an intangible levy, best summed up by President Bush’s question in the aftermath of 9/11: “Why do they hate us so?” He answered the question in a typically American manner that underscores the sense of exceptionalism that informs US policy: “They hate our freedoms.” Perhaps. But a more honest answer might be that “they” hate US power and a system that “no matter how benevolent the intentions . . . will generate some violence . . . [by] those left outside the expanding walls [of empire].”²⁹ More to the point, the weak have always envied the strong; it is a natural human reaction.

If foreign envy were the only concern of US policymakers, the wailings of the French, Russians, or Germans would be as ephemeral whispers lost in the rising American chorus. But these allied fulminations represent only the least threatening manifestation of challenge to the American empire. There are potential great-power rivals. China is most often cited as the likeliest candidate. Several respected US research institutions have concluded, however, that, “China [remains far] from the threshold of global military power . . . [and that] the formidable US lead over China in military technology may well expand in the 21st century.”³⁰ Hobbled by a shrinking population and a bankrupt social infrastructure, Russia’s bleak demographics leave it weak into the foreseeable future. The European Union, wired into the information age and potentially militarily capable, could emerge as a peer competitor, assuming it achieves actual political integration. But EU nations share US democratic values and a commitment to open trade and market systems. They grumble at US dominance, but they are unlikely to truly undermine an order that has brought them prosperity as well.

The absence of great power rivals provides little comfort, however. In their place, “a viper’s nest of perils . . . that run the gamut from terror and international organized crime to rogue states and genocidal violence fueled by ethnic hatred” challenges the established order.³¹ Professor John Keegan recommends

that, in response, “the great work of disarming tribes, sects, warlords, and criminals—a principal achievement of monarchs in the 17th century and empires in the 19th” be revived today.³² Combating forces that have typically nibbled at the edges of empire has heretofore “been trivialized as hovering somehow beneath the dignity of serious strategists and military planners.”³³ The physical scars of 9/11—as well as its lingering economic aftershocks—make clear that the United States can no longer afford the luxury of that conceit.

Still and all, militarily engaging the Lilliputians might be the easiest element of a complex problem. Even in their most terrible forms, transnational terrorism, rogue states, and international crime are dwarfed by American power. The counterstrikes the United States can expect from al Qaeda, the narco-traffickers, and the disaffected will be as pinpricks in the flanks of empire. It is crucial that US responses, while firm, be measured against other interests. The danger ultimately lies not so much in what others do, but in what the United States does or does not.

Of this World and In It

Ironically, the United States, the nation of immigrants, “remains a profoundly provincial, monolingual nation . . . not [much] interested in the rest of the world and certainly [not knowing] much about it.”³⁴ Yet, as Bacevich argues, “America’s purpose is the creation of an open and integrated international order based on the principles of democratic capitalism, with the United States as the ultimate guarantor of order and enforcer of norms.”³⁵ Can the United States restore order and lead a world in which it has little interest and knowledge?

It is a critical question because the nature and ultimate success or failure of the American empire depends on its answer. If Americans become a truly insular people, suspicious of the world and of its motives, the nation is likely to head down unsavory paths, to an empire bereft of the values that give the United States a legitimate claim to leadership. In the end, in that event, it will become an empire that will have drifted from its bedrock moorings and it will fail. The better road would have Americans undertake their responsibility to genuinely engage the world they purport to lead, building relationships that will both facilitate the restoration of imperial order and soften the resentments that breed chaos. There is no guarantee that such an empire will succeed—history has no precedent—but in the effort Americans will have put behind them the rubble of 9/11, returning to the path upon which they were embarked, while remaining true to themselves.

NOTES

1. Rudyard Kipling, “The Lesson,” accessible at <http://whitewolf.newcastle.edu.au/words/authors/K/KiplingRudyard/verse/p1/lesson.html>.

2. John Quincy Adams, 1821, while Secretary of State under President James Monroe, in a speech at the US House of Representatives in honor of Independence Day. Excerpt at <http://www.uiowa.edu/~c030162/Common/Handouts/Other/JQ-ADAMS.html>.

3. Michael Ignatieff, “The American Empire: The Burden,” *The New York Times Magazine*, 5 January 2003, p. 4, http://www.ksg.harvard.edu/news/opeds/america_burden_ignatieff_nyt_010503.htm.

4. W. Michael Reisman, “Pre-emptive Force: When Can It Be Used?” Foreign Policy Association, 13 January 2003, transcript of panel discussion, p. 4.

5. Jay Tolson, "The New American Empire? Americans Have an Enduring Aversion to Planting the Flag on Foreign Soil: Is that Attitude Changing?" *U.S. News and World Report*, 13 January 2003, p. 37.
6. Robert N. Bellah, "The New American Empire," *Commonweal*, 25 October 2002, p. 12.
7. Max Boot, "Doctrine of the 'Big Enchilada,'" *The Washington Post*, 14 October 2002, sec. A, p. 29.
8. Discussions between the author and several French colonels, 7-10 April 2003, in Paris, as part of annual exchange between students of the National War College and students of the Centre des Hautes Etudes Militaires (CHEM). The French counterparts carefully adhered to national policy as set forth by French civilian authorities. Even given the expected fidelity to policy, however, the author was struck by the clear discomfort of the French military vis-à-vis the "unilateral" nature of the US action in Iraq. While sympathetic to the specific goal of removing Saddam Hussein and acknowledging that US values were consonant with those of the French, the notion that US goals and values could be imposed was perceived as, in the last analysis, dangerous.
9. George W. Bush, *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, President Bush's transmittal letter to the US Congress, 17 September 2002, p. 1.
10. *Ibid.*
11. Charles S. Maier, "An American Empire? The Problems of Frontiers and Peace in 21st Century World Politics," *Harvard Magazine*, November-December 2002, p. 28.
12. Discussions between the author and Colonel Richard Hooker (USA), 7-10 April 2003, in Paris. Colonel Hooker, a fellow National War College student, firmly adheres to the view that "the word 'empire' has a defined meaning" and that it is intellectual sleight-of-hand to shoehorn US actions into that definition. His view reflects that of many Americans. The point is clear, however, that whatever the name, the US government must deal with the view abroad—and the actions that spring from those perceptions—that America is an empire, and has to act accordingly if it is going to protect its vital interests.
13. Andrew S. Bacevich, "New Rome, New Jerusalem," *The Wilson Quarterly*, 26 (Summer 2002), 50.
14. Jonathan Freedland, "Hail Bush: A New Roman Empire," *The Guardian*, 22 September 2002, p. 1, <http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2002/09/19/1032054915705.html>.
15. Stephen Peter Rosen, "The Future of War and the American Military: Demography, Technology and the Politics of Modern Empire," *Harvard Magazine*, May-June 2002, p. 31, <http://www.harvard-magazine.com/on-line/050218.html>.
16. Andrews S. Bacevich, "Policing Utopia: The Military Imperatives of Globalization," *The National Interest*, No. 56 (Summer 1999), p. 1, http://www.ciaonet.org/olj/ni/ni_99baa01.html.
17. US Department of Defense, *Quadrennial Defense Review Report*, 30 September 2001, p. IV, <http://www.defenselink.mil/pubs/qdr2001.pdf>.
18. Bacevich, "Policing Utopia," p. 6.
19. Thomas Donnelly, "The Past as Prologue: An Imperial Manual," *Foreign Affairs*, 81 (July/August 2002), 2, <http://www.foreignaffairs.org/2002701fareviewessay8529/thomas-donnelly/the-past-as-prologue.html>.
20. Freedland, p. 2. Certainly the presence of US military bases is not always a guarantee of acquiescence; consider the difficulties the United States encountered with Turkey and Saudi Arabia in the war against Iraq.
21. "The American Empire," *STRATFOR*, 2 April 2003, p. 4, <http://www.stratfor.biz/1Story.neo>.
22. "Howard Defends Terror Stance," Reuters, 12 December 2002, http://onenews.nzoom.com/onenews_detail/0,1227,152638-1-9,00.html. The "deputy sheriff" phrase was used previously, in 1999, when an Australian media report suggested he would serve in that role in the region in support of the US alliance. See "Howard Dubbed 'Deputy Sheriff,'" <http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2002/12/02/1038712881405.html>.
23. Freedland, p. 2.
24. Glenn Kessler and Karen DeYoung, "Foreign Policy: After Iraq, U.S. Debates Next Steps," *The Washington Post*, 13 April 2003, sec. A.
25. Rosen, p. 4.
26. Boot, p. 3.
27. Ignatieff, p. 3.
28. Robert S. Litwak, "The Imperial Republic After 9/11," *The Wilson Quarterly*, 26 (Summer 2002), 78.
29. Maier, p. 31.
30. Paul Mann, "U.S. Military Technology Forecast to Outpace China's for Decades," *Aviation Week & Space Technology*, 17 January 2000, p. 432.
31. Bacevich, "Policing Utopia," p. 5.
32. William Anthony Hay, "Challenges of Empire," *Foreign Policy Research Institute: Watch on the West, A Newsletter of FPRI's Center for the Study of America and the West*, 3 (May 2002), 1, <http://www.fpri.org/ww/0305.200205.hay.challengesofempire.html>.
33. Donnelly, p. 2.
34. Bellah, pp. 3-4.
35. Andrew S. Bacevich, *American Empire: The Realities and Consequences of U.S. Diplomacy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 2002), p. 3.