Is America an Imperial Power by Design or by Accident?

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Introduction

America's war on terror and the invasion of Iraq has prompted a renewed academic debate about the extent of America's imperialness. This debate is not new. It has occurred at various points in America's history, such as during the Spanish-American War in the late nineteenth century or during the Vietnam War in the 1960s. Much of the debate centers on whether or not America technically qualifies as an 'empire.'

Although use of the term is controversial, the enormous power of the United States is beyond dispute and most scholars agree that even if the U.S. is not actually an empire, its foreign policy could at various points in its history be characterized as imperial. The question is whether these imperial tendencies are purposeful or accidental in nature. While some refer to the U.S. as a 'military juggernaut intent on world domination,' (Johnson 2004: 4) others view it as a 'reluctant superpower' (Ikenberry 2006: 154).

I argue that America's imperial legacy stretches far beyond the actions and policies of the Bush administration and that as a consequence, its imperial behavior can be interpreted as both accidental and purposeful depending on the historical situation. While the invasion of Iraq and the colonialism of the Spanish-American War suggest a taste for empire, the United States' reluctant use of its power in the postwar period suggests otherwise. There are also gray areas of purpose in which it is not clear whether the American government was pursuing imperial power specifically or merely wealth and influence in the international system. Additionally, while there are undoubtedly some imperialist Americans who relish the idea of an American empire, Theodore Roosevelt being one famous example, it would be false to attribute these same sentiments to the entire country as a whole, many of whom regard such power-grabbing as deeply un-American.

Thus it seems that there is a fundamental tension between America's occasional imperial aspirations and its more deeply rooted anti-imperial traditions (Hunt 2007: 310) which lead it to pursue imperialistic power at some moments, while seeking to constrain itself at others.

An 'Imperial' Power?

The United States is the most powerful country in the world. Its 'military power has no rival' (Mann 2003: 18) and its economy is one of the largest and most dynamic globally (Ikenberry 2001: 191). It 'dominates world politics by providing the language, ideas, and institutional frameworks around which much of the world turns' and is the 'central hub through which the world's important military, political, economic, scientific, and cultural connections pass (Ikenberry 2001: 192). But does this make it an 'imperial' power?

There is a large debate concerning the degree to which the United States is imperial. As Slater argues, 'imperial implies great power, not merely unequal power; it implies the capacity to dominate or control other states, not merely to influence them; it implies an empire, not merely a sphere of influence' (1976: 67). While some maintain that the United States is, in fact, an empire, others insist that it is simply a hegemon.

The exact definition of empire itself is controversial, but most scholars broadly agree that this type of political system is characterized by asymmetrical rule based on coercion (Mann 2008: 8; Spruyt 2008: 297). Modern empires exercise influence through 'direct military and political intervention, the threat of intervention, the mediation of proxy states, or multilateral institutions in which the imperial power is the dominant member' (Lutz 2006: 594). According to these broad definitions, the United States constitutes an empire.

The American empire is not like empires in the past which were built on colonies and conquest, (Ignatieff 2003: 3) but it nevertheless 'qualifies as a de facto empire' due to its attempts 'to enforce its will on other states militarily' (Robinson 2005: 37). Most importantly, it 'does what all important empires have done in the past: namely, set the principal rules for those who live within the *imperium* and punish and reward in equal measure those who either disobey or play by these rules' (Cox 2007: 5).

Nevertheless, some scholars resist the label 'empire' and argue that it has been misapplied to America. They point to the United States' relations with its allies and its willingness to operate multilaterally through international agreements and security pacts which depend on the consent of the other participants (Robinson 2005: 43). Because of this, some scholars argue that hegemon, rather than empire, is a better descriptor of the United States (Hunt 2007: 313; Robinson 2005: 37). The distinction is based on legitimacy: a hegemon is an 'empire with consent' where the hegemon sets the rules of the international system, but also plays by them (Mann 2003: 12).

Nevertheless, despite this disagreement over what term best describes the United States, most scholars agree that the United States does, from time to time, act imperialistically (Lake 2008: 286; Saull 2008: 311; Sterling-Folker 2008: 320-321).

The Imperial Legacy

According to Mann: 'the United States has always been imperial, though in very different ways in different times and places' (Mann 2008: 45). Some scholars argue that the United States was an imperialist nation right from the outset, and describe the settlement of the continental U.S. as the first stage of American imperialism (Mann 2008: 13-14). With the 1823 Monroe Doctrine, the United States 'declared all of Latin America its sphere of influence,' thus beginning its assertion of hemispheric, rather than merely continental, control (Johnson 2004: 2). During the Spanish-American War the 'United States first became a formal colonial empire by acquiring the unincorporated territories of Philippines, Puerto Rico, Guam, and Samoa' (Go 2007: 76; Mann 2008: 15). The United States continued to assert its dominance over the lower half of the western hemisphere by launching 28 interventions in Central America and the Caribbean between 1899 and 1930 in order to overthrow hostile governments or suppress rebels (Mann 2008: 19).

The power of the United States grew after two successive world wars, and emerged as one of two superpowers after the second (Mann 2008: 22). After World War II the United States 'built a sphere of influence and a weak economic zone over Western Europe and Northeast Asia' with 'extensive control over the security policies of West Germany, Japan and South Korea' (Lake 2008: 285).

During the Cold War the informal American empire continued in the 3rd World, where the 'U.S. intervened militarily against revolutionary movements or mildly leftist-leaning governments, confident that it could rule them indirectly, through local oligarchies' (Mann 2003: 88). It also developed 'temporary (indirect) colonies in Korea and Vietnam' (Mann 2008: 25).

After the collapse of the USSR, America's 'newfound military preponderance led to interventions in Panama, the Gulf War, Somalia, Haiti, Bosnia, and Kosovo' (Mann 2003: 6). Both the first Bush administration and the Clinton administration extended the range of U.S. military interventions against what were termed "rogue states": Iraq in 1991, airstrikes in Yugoslavia, intervention in Somalia and the acquiring of military bases in Saudi Arabia and the Balkans (Mann 2008: 37). Under Clinton, many believed that American military power was being used for 'purely humanitarian reasons' but this is not easily distinguishable from past imperial powers' 'civilizing missions' (Mann 2003: 8). Lastly, America's imperial legacy is evident most recently with 'the invasion and occupation of Iraq [and]

the creation of a client state in Afghanistan' (Hunt 2007: 309).

Today the American empire consists of several unincorporated territories: the Mariana Islands, the Marshall Islands, the Federated States of Micronesia, Puerto Rico, Guam, the Virgin Islands, and American Samoa (Lutz 2006: 595). It also maintains imperial influence over Korea, whose military remains under the wartime command of the US military, and Japan, which allocates part of its domestic budget to the U.S. Dept of Defense for military bases positioned there (Lutz 2006: 595). The U.S. has over 700 military bases in other parts of the world as well, (Johnson 2004: 4) with 'more than one million men and women at arms on five continents' (Cox 2005: 18).

Although defining America as an 'empire' is controversial, there is little question that its foreign policy has at times taken on an imperial cast. The larger debate concerns whether this imperial legacy has been deliberate or accidental in nature.

The 'Reluctant Superpower'?

Some scholars view America's imperial nature as unintentional. This outlook is best summed up by the historian Ernest May who stated that "some nations achieve greatness, the United States had greatness thrust upon it" (Bacevich 2002: 7). According to this view, there was no deliberate purpose to America's rise to imperial power status and that, in fact, America's foreign policy was a response to external factors (Bacevich 2002: 7).

Thus, the entire history of America's imperial legacy can be viewed as an inadvertent but natural response to outside events. The Spanish-American war was a response to Spain's intolerable repression of Cuba (Bacevich 2002: 7) and the blowing up of the battleship USS *Maine* in the Havana harbor in 1898 (Kurth 2002: 407). World War I was a similar situation in which the US was provoked by the sinking of the Lusitania and the violation of the US's neutrality rights by Germany (Bacevich 2002: 7). Pearl Harbor was the provocation for entering World War II (Bacevich 2002: 8; Kurth 2002: 407) and engagement in the Cold War was a response to Communist aggression (Bacevich 2002: 8). Post Cold-War interventions, such as that of Kosovo, were, like Cuba earlier, due to intolerable brutality (Bacevich 2002: 8). Finally, the most recent example: the 9/11 attacks provoking the 'war on terror' (Kurth 2002: 407). Bacevich calls this the 'myth of the "reluctant superpower,"' with 'Americans asserting themselves only under duress and then always for the noblest purposes' (Bacevich 2002: 8).

However, Ikenberry defends this idea of the 'reluctant superpower.' He notes that America's geographical remoteness was a historical factor in shaping the United States' disinclination to 'directly dominate or manage great power relations' (Ikenberry 2006: 154). He cites historical examples such as the Louisiana Purchase where 'the United States purchased territory from France rather than acquiring it by conquest' (Ikenberry 2006: 154) as well as the fact that the United States had only a 'tiny standing army and little capacity to mobilize or project military force' prior to 1914 (Ikenberry 2006: 154). This aspect of Ikenberry's argument is relatively weak, as America's reluctance to dominate during this time is most likely due to its limited capabilities as a weak power rather than a lack of motivation.

Ikenberry's 'reluctant superpower' argument is perhaps more convincing when he applies it to the post-World War II world order. Ikenberry, contrary to those he terms revisionists who argue that the United States deliberately pursued imperialist policies post-World War II, (Ikenberry 2004: 610-611) argues that the United States lacked 'a singular grand strategic vision to inform the construction of the American-led post-war order' and therefore were not acting purposefully imperialistic (2006: 158). Instead, the United States was eager 'to construct a legitimate international order' one that was 'recognized as acceptable and desirable by the countries operating within it' (Ikenberry 2006: 158). He cites the United States' willingness to compromise and accommodate European views as evidence of this (Ikenberry 2006: 158)

Furthermore, he argues that the United States deliberately attempted to organize the post-World War II order in such a way that it would not need to manage it (Ikenberry 2006: 157). In particular, he points to the American proposals for a system of free trade. He argues that the State Department was not merely espousing 'the virtues of open markets,' but that they recognized that such a system 'would largely be self-regulating, leaving the United States to operate

within it, but without the burdens of direct and ongoing supervision'(Ikenberry 2001: 204-205).

Ikenberry does acknowledge the hierarchical relationship between the United States and post-war Europe. However, he insists that such dominance was not due to an imperialist impulse by the United States but by what he terms an 'empire by invitation' (Ikenberry 2001: 203). He argues that 'European governments sought to elicit and influence the projection of US power into Europe…primarily for security and resource reasons' (Ikenberry 2006: 23). Nevertheless, while Ikenberry's 'reluctant superpower' argument is clearly applicable to Europe, it does not explain the United States' imperialist behavior toward other parts of the world.

America's Desire for Power

There is a similar argument which posits that the United States' propensity toward imperialist actions and policies is merely a function of its great power status. According to Andrèani, 'empire and power are actually synonyms' (2005: 69). While most scholars do not put the relation so simplistically, they do note the tendency of great powers to act imperialistically: 'only weak states with no alternatives adopt a conception of the national interest restricted to mere political survival. In effect, goes the argument, interests and commitments of states naturally and inevitably expand as their power expands' (Slater 1976: 66)

Therefore, it should not be surprising that the U.S., as a great power, acts imperialistically because that is what great powers do, (Sterling-Folker 2008: 322) the source of America's imperialism being power itself (Slater 1976: 66). As America grew stronger, they were more able and likely to use that strength (Kagan 2004: 143). According to this argument, the United States was not pursuing imperial power per se, but it was pursuing wealth and influence which, once attained, created the capacity and thus the incentive to behave imperially.

Rather than being motivated by external threats or incentives, as the 'reluctant superpower' argument suggests, Zakaria argues that America's 'foreign policy was driven by an awareness of American strength and by the search for greater influence over the international environment' (1999: 182). This was true from the earliest period of expansion through most of American history, (Zakaria 1999: 182) but it was at the turn of the century when American power became so great that it turned imperial. Like other great powers, 'it enlarged its military and diplomatic apparatus; it annexed territories; it sought basing rights; it participated in great-power conferences' (Zakaria 1999: 182). Because great powers are strong enough to do so, they often define their interests in ways that exceed the standard concern for national security and project their power outward, and the U.S. was no exception (Zakaria 1999: 182).

This is most evident in the post-Cold War period when the U.S. found itself to be the world's only superpower. The U.S. pursued a foreign policy designed to increase and maintain its global dominance. According to Johnson, the U.S. became 'so accustomed to dominance over half the globe that the thought of giving it up was inconceivable' (Johnson 2004: 3). Thus, 'humanitarian' interventions in Panama, the Persian Gulf, Somalia, Haiti, Bosnia, Colombia, and Serbia were all undertaken in order to perpetuate America's global power (Johnson 2004: 3). The war in Iraq is seen as the latest example of 'an effort to secure continuing American military and economic supremacy on a global scale over the long term' (Leaman 2004: 235).

Purposeful Imperialism?

Other scholars argue that not only was the United States pursuing power, it was pursuing empire deliberately (Bacevich 2002: 3). Like Zakaria, they argue that rather than merely reacting to threats, Soviet or otherwise, the U.S. has 'built a system of alliances, military deployments, and capabilities that allow it to influence political events all over the world' in order to create global stability that coordinates with expanded U.S. interests (Leaman 2004: 237)

In the 1960s it was common for critics to accuse the United States of a 'deliberate, planned, and generally quite successful effort at world domination under the pretext of the "containment" of a largely nonexistent communist military or political threat' (Slater 1976: 63). Tucker argues that initially, at least, U.S. postwar policy was limited to a concern for national security through the containment of Soviet expansion; however, it later became generalized into the 'broader objective of maintaining a world environment congenial to American values and institutions' through 'an

activist, interventionist projection of American power overseas' (Slater 1976: 66). Johnson maintains that America's 'Cold War security system of alliances and bases was built on manufactured threats and driven by expansionary impulses' from the beginning (Ikenberry 2004: 147).

Hunt argues that in areas of Latin America, East Asia and Europe the U.S. 'established explicitly colonial administrations as well as exercised informal control through proconsuls, economic and military aid programs, covert operations, and diplomatic carrots and sticks' all deliberately in order to create empire and make distant regions responsive to its wishes (2007: 309). Although this was not primarily achieved through the annexation of territories in the traditional manner of empires, the U.S. nevertheless sought to dominate other economies and 'keep friendly governments in power—through quiet subversion or, if necessary, outright military intervention' (Judis 2004: 55).

Scholars disagree about the motives behind America's drive for empire. Some emphasize material interests. For example, Mann argues that interventions from 1900 until the mid-1930s were due to U.S. business interests in those countries, with profit being one of the primary motives (2008: 20). Judis continues this line of thought and argues that the war in Iraq is the latest in a series of great power attempts to control the region's oil fields (2004: 55). Ikenberry, as a proponent of the 'reluctant superpower' argument dismisses this as merely 'an echo of a revisionist tradition that sees American global dominance driven by expansionary and exploitative capitalists' (2001: 192).

Other scholars emphasize the idea of American exceptionalism and the United States' desire to promote democracy abroad. American exceptionalism is the idea that Americans 'have a special role to play in transforming the world' (Judis 2004: 58). According to this view, 'American power is seen as being put at the service of universal ideas – openness, democracy, limited government, human dignity, and the rule of law' (Ikenberry 2004: 619). This is an old American tradition; from Wilson to Clinton presidents have 'portrayed the United States as a "liberal beacon" for the world' (Ikenberry 2004: 619). This tradition has only continued with the war in Iraq, with the spread of liberal democracy one of the justifications the Bush administration has given for the invasion (Kurth 2002: 407).

The recent actions of the Bush administration and the political philosophy of the neo-conservatives who form its base have renewed criticisms of the United States as deliberately imperialistic. The Bush administration's ideas about American grand strategy called for 'unilateral and pre-emptive, even preventive, use of force…ultimately unconstrained by the rules and norms of the international community' which seemed to 'form a neo-imperial vision in which the United States arrogates to itself the global role of setting standards, determining threats, using force, and meting out justice' (Ikenberry 2006: 214).

What many find most objectionable about the neo-conservatives is their blatant acceptance and promulgation of American imperialism (Cox 2005: 18-19; Sterling-Folker 2008: 322). They argue that 'neoconservative intellectuals candidly acknowledge that the United States was on an imperial mission' (Judis 2004: 58) citing people such as Richard Haas of the State Department, who, in 2000 'urged Americans to "re-conceive their global role from one of a traditional nation-state to an imperial power"' (Go 2007: 75).

The neocons' championing of imperialism is not viewed as an anomaly in U.S. history, but is often compared to the imperialism of Theodore Roosevelt and others during the late nineteenth century (Johnson 2004: 2; Judis 2004: 56; Smith 2003 xvi). The Roosevelt Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine could be viewed as an early example of America's use of pre-emption; it unilaterally asserted 'the right of the United States to intervene militarily in the western hemisphere to preserve order' (Leffler 2003: 1053). Vaguely linked to national security, this doctrine was used to justify repeated interventions in Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Nicaragua and Haiti (Leffler 2003: 1053).

After the invasion of the Philippines, the term empire was used readily by proponents; imperialists of the time argued that the U.S. would use its power to bring democracy to foreign lands (Go 2007: 76). Bush himself 'drew an analogy between the United States' attempt to create democracy in the Philippines and its effort to create a democratic Middle East through the invasion and occupation of Iraq' (Judis 2004: 50).

The recent unilateralism of the Bush administration and the colonialism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century could be considered two high points of American imperialism. Both seemingly bolster the argument that the

United States was deliberately imperialist. However, some scholars qualify this argument by noting that at both times these imperial impulses were elite-driven, and may have been at odds with the American public as a whole.

For example, during the Spanish-American War although certain 'imperialists were encouraged by the global surge in colonialism' (Mann 2008: 15) others contested 'the desirability of overseas expansion' (Mann 2008: 14). Even after the United States had occupied Cuba and the Philippines, there was always a shortage of Americans willing to go there (Mann 2008: 18). This opposition to imperialism could be seen again in the anti-war protestors and critics of Vietnam in the 1960s (Hunt 2007: 310).

This seeming divide between elite and popular opinion can also be seen during the imperialism of the Bush administration. While neoconservatives in the administration espoused the 'need to re-make the Middle East, refashion the Arab world, topple dictators, and force democracy on other societies,' others demonstrated against the Iraq war (Kennedy et. al. 2003: 15). Some scholars point to 9/11's 'popular mobilizing power' (Mann 2003: 9) as the major factor in convincing anti-imperial Americans to go to war. They argue that neoconservatives seized on the shock and fear produced by 9/11 'to induce Americans into global adventures for which they would have otherwise lacked interest' (Mann 2003: 5). This was evident in the fact that 'as soon as President Bush revealed the price tag for occupying Iraq, public support plummeted' (Ikenberry 2004: 150).

Nevertheless, some argue that the elite/popular divide regarding neo-imperialism is overstated. Sterling-Folker points out that 'the neo-cons did not come from Mars… they came from America' and they could not have carried out their policies if there was no American support for them (2008: 322-323). Further, the invasion of Iraq was at the time supported by most government agencies as well as 76% of the American public (Sterling-Folker 2008: 322).

In spite of this, many scholars maintain that the American public is not suited for empire. Mann argues that Americans are not interested in empire because they are not interested in international affairs in general (2003: 102) whereas Hunt contends that the current imperialists 'stand sharply, even self-consciously at odds with a prominent anti-imperial strain of thought' in America which views 'expansionist, self-aggrandizing powers' as 'simply un-American' (2007: 309-310).

Conclusion

Many have decried the actions of the Bush administration as the latest in a series of imperialistic actions undertaken by the United States. However, it is possible that the U.S. has passed its recent imperial stage. Some scholars envision a 'retreat from empire' (Saull 2008: 309) as the costs of military interventions materialize and Americans become more and more disillusioned with the quagmire in Iraq. Perhaps this is also a reflection of a deeply rooted American anti-imperialism, or what Theodore Roosevelt termed '"the queer lack of imperial instinct that our people show"' (Schlesinger 2005: 45).

America, much like most great powers, has behaved imperialistically at various times throughout its history. To some degree, it may have been a response to external events. Presumably these events were seized upon by governmental elites as opportunities to expand and project U.S. power abroad. The wax and wane between imperial inclinations in the United States is most likely due to populist restraint on elite imperial impulses. Thus, at alternate moments in its history as a great power, the United States has at various times behaved as a 'reluctant superpower' as well as a purposeful imperial power.

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