Anarchy and Occupation: The US in the Mexican-American War and in Afghanistan

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Anarchy drains imperial power. Hubris resulting from the unparalleled capabilities of empire blinds leaders from acknowledging the complexities of exerting political control beyond their territory and emboldens them to pursue domination projects that may lead to failure. The widely cited Athenian imperial threat to the Melians – '[…] the strong do what they have the power to do and the weak accept what they have to accept' (Thucydides 1967, 5.89) – is, in spite of its descriptive value, limited. Sometimes in history, the defeated, due to their very weakness, have prevailed, and the powerful have been rendered incapable despite their might. In Thucydides's account of the Peloponnesian War, a less acclaimed story reminds of the limits of raw power before lack of control, widespread disobedience, and resistance. At the beginning of the war, a Theban army invaded Plataea, a vulnerable town allied to Athens. Relying on their unmatched potential for violence, the invaders offered an arrangement of subjection to the Plataeans who, fearing the consequences of their refusal, accepted the proposal. What first seemed to be an effortless occupation got the Theban force trapped within the town walls of Plataea, a city invaded yet not controlled. And, when the people realized that their numbers could outweigh the occupiers' arms, popular and disorganized resistance erupted. The invading army was annihilated, and Thebes withdrew at the unexpected strength of the defeated (Thucydides 1967, 2.2–2.11).

Unrivaled capabilities to exert power do not always result in the unchallenged exercise of power. In 1846 and 2001, the United States invaded two territories barely ruled by two weak and fragile states that posed no real threat to the American army. The rising empire of the 19th century advanced almost unimpeded through Mexico, conquering the country and collapsing its political structures. The global pole of power of 2001 captured in a matter of weeks the territory of Afghanistan and dismantled the feeble order that had prevailed since 1996. But these two successful and fast invasions ended in withdrawal. Why does a great power that finds no capable opponent to its imperial actions restrain its expansion and retreat from occupied territories? Superior strength does not ensure domination. The unrestricted victories of the American forces in 1846 and 2001 resulted in the destruction of the structures of domination and control that existed in Mexico and Afghanistan at the time. The disruption of the channels used by the defeated states to exercise at least elemental control over their territories, in both cases, left the United States with barely any means through which it could rule and establish an order of its own, and easy incursions then turned into costly occupations – into wars of attrition – that prompted imperial abdication. When actions of imperialism – either intentionally or inadvertently – result in anarchy, the exercise of empire is hindered.

The Strength of the Empire

Vast capabilities to exert force are useful to compel specific rivals. Power politics analyses are accurate to consider relative power – the extent to which a certain state's strength compares to another's – a core variable in the outcomes of interstate politics (see, for example, Morgenthau 1985, 174–76; Mearsheimer 2001a, 34–36, 42–43). During the American invasions of Mexico in 1846 and Afghanistan in 2001, the greater power of the United States' armies not only served to easily subjugate two weaker states but also to eventually disband them. Raw power and violence brought sound victories at the initial stages of both wars. However, the appropriate means for achieving conquest and overthrowing local ruling groups might not be as convenient for establishing dominion over captured territories. As George F. Kennan stated at the National War College at the beginning of the Cold War, in 1946:

We may defeat the enemy, but life goes on. The demands and aspirations of people, the compulsions that worked on them before they were defeated, begin to operate again after the defeat, unless you can do something to remove them. No victory can really be complete unless you eradicate the people against whom you were fighting or change basically the whole compulsion under which they live (as cited in Gaddis 1982, 39, 40).

During imperial occupation, there is no more a clearly defined rival, but a complex network of social relations made of the interactions of heterogeneous groups and interests that cannot be completely subdued nor defeated by mere violence or appearances of power. To control occupied territories, it is necessary to establish political hierarchy among the conquered by either co-opting the existing structures of domination or creating new ones – military strength is not enough.

The occupation of Afghanistan ended in 2021 after almost twenty years. At the height of its power, under the discourse of a global war against terrorism, the United States decided to invade a territory controlled almost in its entirety by the Islamist militant group of the Taliban. The main objective of the invasion launched in October 2001, as stated by the Bush administration, was to '[…] disrupt the use of Afghanistan as a terrorist base of operations and to attack the military capability of the Taliban regime' (Bush 2001). Allied with the Afghan Northern Alliance, a political rival of the Taliban emirate, the United States carried a land and air military campaign that decimated an irregular army composed of approximately 45,000 Taliban soldiers and 2,700 al-Qa'eda jihadists. By mid-November, the Taliban had abandoned Kabul and had retreated in the eastern and southern regions of Afghanistan. On November 25, the city of Kunduz surrendered, and, on December 6, the last stronghold of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, Kandahar, had fallen. The Taliban fled and hid in the rough terrain of the country they had controlled.

The invasion, however, shattered the domination structures used by the Taliban to control most of Afghanistan. As the American army took over the country, anarchy spread. Despite a swift initial victory, the invading force could not rule over the occupied territory, as no structure upon which to establish domination endured. Thus, the United States was dragged into the anarchical complexities of Afghanistan and what could have been a limited conflict turned into a long war that has cost 73,438 deaths to the coalition led by the United States, 47,245 civilian casualties, and close to $2 trillion to the American government (Knickmeyer 2021). The undesired deadlock that became the occupation of Afghanistan resembles an older event in the history of American imperialism – the Mexican-American War of 1846.

In April 1846, President James K. Polk declared war against Mexico, at the time a feeble state eroded by decades of internal strife and international confrontation. The official cause for the war had been an armed incident between Mexican and American troops that occurred in contested territory on the Texan border––'But now, after reiterated menaces, Mexico has passed the boundary of the United States, has invaded our territory and shed American blood upon the American soil' (Polk 1846), stated Polk in his message to the United States Congress on May 11, 1846. However, as historians have found, plans for the invasion preceded such an event and territorial expansion had already been attempted by economic means, but the Mexican government refused to lose more land to its northern neighbor. The first stage of the war was brief. American armies attacked Mexico in a threefold clamp that collapsed the ill-equipped and poorly manned defending forces in the northwestern, northeastern, and western regions of Mexico. By December 1846, the vast and underpopulated northern territory of Mexico was under American occupation; in March 1847, Veracruz – Mexico's main port – had fallen to the United States Navy; in April, the city of Puebla, neighboring Mexico City, had surrendered to the troops of General Winfield Scott; and, by mid-September, the last fort defending the Mexican capital – Chapultepec Castle – had been defeated. On September 14, as the remains of the Mexican state fled to Queretaro City, the American flag waved in downtown Mexico City. On December 7, 1847, Polk described the invasion to the Congress: 'History presents no parallel of so many glorious victories achieved by any nation within so short a period. Our Army, regulars, and volunteers have covered themselves with imperishable honors' (Polk 1847).

But, the fast initial victory turned promptly into a stalemate. What could have been a 'limited' conflict for capturing just the least-populated half of the Mexican territory, by 1947 had become a widespread war for unclear territorial goals that had already collapsed the existing structures of domination, through which the Mexican state had exercised as much control as it could over the complex political and social realities of the country. As happened in 2001 in Afghanistan, the unmatched power of the invading forces collapsed the political structures that had allowed until then

at least rudimentary state control over such intricate and extensive territories. The American armies of 1847 and 2001 were victorious and also stalled. Success had resulted in ungovernability.

The Complexity of Occupation

In war, invasion is barely the beginning. Occupation, as the history of empires has shown, demands more than brute force. When the Spanish conquistadors took over the Aztec empire in 1521, they were careful to keep the domination structures used by Tenochtitlan so they could use them to build their own imperial rule over Mesoamerica. The Spanish Empire overthrew the dominant power in the region but – either because of lack of force at the time or due to political calculation – did not dismantle the existing hierarchical order; instead, Hernán Cortés ruled through it from Mexico City. In Afghanistan in 2001 and Mexico in 1847, occupation forces did not take advantage of local domination structures but rather obliterated them and, by doing so, got entrapped into the complexities of '[…] a particular network-structure in which actors – whether human or corporate – lack authoritative ties with one another or to a common third party' (i.e. anarchy), as defined by Daniel H. Nexon (2009, 26).

John J. Mearsheimer warned in November 2001 that bare military force would not result in an American victory in Afghanistan. Instead, 'it makes the problem worse. In contrast, a strategy that emphasizes clever diplomacy, intelligence-gathering, and carefully selected military strikes might produce success eventually if we pursue it with patience and tenacity' (Mearsheimer 2001b). The military defeat of the Taliban that year did not bring control over Afghanistan but rather presented the American coalition with a complicated land where almost no centralized structure for control or domination remained. Efforts to build a new Afghan state from scratch under American control were met by internal political discord and international hesitance. As Carter Malkasian argues in*The American War in Afghanistan: A History*, overconfidence blinded President Bush's Cabinet, who deemed an accelerated strategy of state-building in Afghanistan based on a local, broad governing coalition secondary (2021, chap. 5). During the first years of the occupation, the Taliban had profited from the limited reach of the United States in the country and, by 2006, they had regained military strength and popularity among rural sectors of the Afghan population. The lack of political structures over which the occupying forces could implement control over Afghanistan – anarchy – created room for the almost extinct Taliban to maneuver and thrive.

Starting in 2009, President Barack Obama sought to reinforce American presence in Afghanistan (Indurthy 2011); however, the advance of the Taliban could not be stopped. By 2016, one-fifth of Afghan territory was either controlled or contested by the Taliban (Almukhtar and Yourish 2016); by 2018, that figure had reached 46% (Gambrell 2021); and, in 2019, when the United States Military decided to stop counting the Taliban advance, it was estimated that 80% of the country could be lost by the end of that year (Zucchino 2019). In mid-August 2021, the full withdrawal of American troops precipitated the collapse of a foreign-backed government that ruled over no genuine domination structure. In twenty years, the outstanding power of the United States has not been sufficient to establish a steady rule in a territory lacking the basic framework over which dominion could be settled. The reach of the American occupation remained trapped within the limits of the cities and along the main roads while most of Afghanistan escaped its control. The Taliban prevailed by surviving in an endless state of war that has drained the United States since 2001.

Ralph Waldo Emerson cautioned in 1846: 'The United States will conquer Mexico, but it will be as the man swallows arsenic, which brings him down in turn. Mexico will poison us' (Emerson 2001, 514). The war quickly became a poisonous enterprise. General Scott and President Polk's negotiator, Nicholas Trist, had seen the uncontested advance of the American army over Mexico with preoccupation. They feared the Mexican state would not be able to survive an unrestricted attack, and, as war opponents had warned, the United States would thus be forced to choose between 'hav[ing] to drop the war, or annex[ing] a country…' (Brent 1954, 463). By September 1847, the invasion had succeeded but the occupation had just started. The invading forces had collapsed the fragile political structures over which the Mexican state subsisted and had seized a territory that they were incapable of neither ruling nor controlling by themselves. Popular resistance met the occupiers throughout the country, improvised and unrelated guerrillas appeared across the newly conquered land to oppose the American presence, and, as the war reached a deadlock, indiscipline arose among the ranks of the United States Army and the cost of the war started to take its toll on the treasury and President Polk's position in American politics.

Fearing the unexpected consequences of the invasion, General Scott and Mr. Trist rushed to secure an agreement with the improvised new Mexican government – which came to be the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo – to prevent the continuation of an interminable war of occupation and to avoid the complete annexation of the anarchical territory south of the Rio Grande, a decision that had the potential to drain the political and economic capabilities of the rising American empire. President Polk, who by the time, as he recorded in his diary, was 'decidedly in favor of insisting on the acquisition of more territory than the provinces named [at the beginning of the invasion]' (Polk 1845, September 4, 1847), saw in this arrangement a solution to a war that had become undesirable and decided to approve the text of the Treaty. Mexico had survived because of its very weakness. The Mexican chaos had hindered complete annexation, and the rising imperial power had fled the unintended trap of anarchy.

Conclusion

The lack of domination structures through which imperial or state power can be exerted – anarchy – strains the capabilities of the occupying force and renders them futile. What at first comes as an untroublesome military triumph may quickly degenerate into an entrapping war of imperial attrition and turn the occupied land into a 'graveyard of empires.' Weakness drew the hubris of the Thebans inside the walls of Platea and also operated for the town's unexpected survival. The American wars in Mexico and Afghanistan were lost not to a certain military force but to the structural might of anarchy. The strength of empire is useless in the draining environment of anarchic network structures – and that may be the reason for imperial powers to incessantly seek the imposition of order.

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