Essay and Reflection: On the American Empire from a British Imperial Perspective

Commentaries that speak of the United States as an empire have until recently been noteworthy for their rarity in the national discourse. For decades, only a handful of historians and leftist critics of US foreign policy dared to make such a claim. Now pundits of all political stripes are openly talking about an American empire, periodicals are devoting special issues to the subject, professional societies are organizing conferences on it, and publishers are issuing a flood of books that detail its workings. Spurred largely by the military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, a vigorous public debate has arisen over what it means for the United States to be an empire.

The willingness to attach the tag of empire to the United States is not unprecedented. It also happened during a previous US foreign policy crisis, the Vietnam War. Then, however, the tag's use was limited to the political left, which wielded words like empire and imperialism to indicate what was wrong with the war. Now the notion of an American empire has found admirers as well as critics, and the debate between them poses a number of intriguing questions. Is an American empire the inevitable outcome of the United States' unrivalled global presence and power, or is it the opportunistic consequence of decisions taken by particular groups pursuing particular ends? Is it the necessary guardian of international order and prosperity or is it the inexorable engine of global inequality and conflict? Is it sui generis or does it resemble previous empires? Does its imperial reign represent the end of history or does it portend the United States' own end? These are questions about the political purposes and moral consequences of power. They speak to the ambitions, anxieties, and antagonisms that the United States' present engagement with the world arouses. Yet they are questions that hinge on the use of the term empire, a

1 I thank Ed Berkowita, Edward Ingram, Wm. Roger Louis, and Marilyn Young for helpful comments, and Lynn Zastoupil and Tim Parsons for invitations to present earlier versions at Rhodes College and at Washington University in St Louis.

2 It also gave rise to the important work of William Appleman Williams and his students, who reshaped the history of US foreign policy with their studies of US imperialism. See, e.g., W. A. Williams, The Roots of the Modern American Empire (New York, 1969).
semantic and conceptual issue that historians have long grappled with, and that require an understanding of causation, chronology, and comparison, modes of analysis that are the stock-in-trade of historians. ‘People in public life reason by historical analogy,’ observes Roger Louis. It should be no surprise, then, that historians have played a prominent role in the debate about what it means for the United States to be an empire.

This essay integrates the US imperial experience with the broader historical inquiry into the nature of empires. It begins by tracing the immediate sources of the current debate about the American empire and the contending stances of its contributors. Next, it examines recent attempts to give historical context to our understanding of an American empire. Finally, it compares the American empire with the British Empire. It proceeds from the premise that the United States is an empire. While this stance limits some lines of inquiry, such as the distinction that has been made between a hegemon and an empire, it opens up others too long closed off. The enduring belief among Americans that the country’s heritage and ambitions are inimical to empire and imperialism has sustained an exceptionalist view of US history that resists comparisons of the consequences of global power. To be sure, the notion of the United States as an empire can encourage exceptionalism of another sort: the argument that the American empire is so much grander than previous ones as to defy comparison. But empire is a term so variable in its meanings that its value as a conceptual category is contingent on an appreciation of the other contexts, conditions, and countries to which it has been applied. To speak of the United States as an empire is to engage of necessity in comparative historical analysis.


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3 For a vigorous critique of US exceptionalism, see *Rethinking American History in a Global Age*, ed. T. Bender (Berkeley, 2002).

4 C. Robin, ‘Grand Designs: How 9/11 Unified Conservatives in Pursuit of Empire’, *Washington Post*, 2 May 2004, B1. This remark echoes the one that Bill Clinton’s secretary of state, Madeleine Albright, directed to Colin Powell, then chairman of the joint chiefs of staff: ‘What’s the point of having this superb military you are always talking about if we can’t use it?’ For a fascinating analysis of one of the
other neo-conservatives believed that the time had come for the United States, which enjoyed unrivalled international supremacy in the aftermath of the Soviet Union’s disintegration, to behave like an imperial power, robustly asserting its will over the rest of the world. A blueprint for what they had in mind was ‘Rebuilding America’s Defenses’, an influential report prepared during the election campaign in 2000 under the aegis of the Project for the New American Century, a Washington think-tank founded by William Kristol, Irving Kristol’s son and the impresario of various neo-conservative enterprises. The report recommended a significant increase in military spending, a restructuring of the armed forces to make them better prepared to carry out foreign interventions and ‘perform … “constabulary” duties’, the repudiation of treaty commitments and international obligations that restrained unilateral action, and other measures designed to ensure that the United States remained ‘the world’s only superpower’.1 Although the report avoided any explicit reference to ‘empire’, its recommendations corresponded closely to Irving Kristol’s notion of what an empire should be and do.

With the inauguration of George W. Bush as president of the United States in January 2001, many neo-conservatives affiliated with the Project and its objectives were appointed to key roles in the administration, giving wider currency and greater influence to their views. A debate soon broke out in conservative foreign policy circles about whether the United States was an empire and, if so, whether its imperial ambitions should be openly embraced. The chief instigator of the debate was the deputy director of the Project and principal author of ‘Rebuilding America’s Defenses’, Thomas Donnelly. He answered both questions with a resounding ‘yes’.2 Seeking to overcome the evident unease with which many conservatives responded to the tag ‘empire’ – Bush had declared during the presidential campaign that the United States was not an empire and the conservative commentator and one-time presidential candidate Patrick Buchanan had written a book arguing that the United States’ political values and traditions were antithetical to empire – Donnelly embraced the term, insisting that empire was the logical and necessary outcome of the United States’ rise to global predominance.3

While the neo-conservatives, then, were singing the praises of American empire from the earliest days of the Bush administration, only an ide-

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3 F. J. Buchanan, A Republic, Not an Empire: Reclaiming America’s Destiny (Washington, DC, 1999).
logically sympathetic cognoscenti heard their siren song prior to al Qaeda’s attacks on New York and Washington. After 9/11, the political climate in the United States was transformed and its military resources mobilized for the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003. In the heady days that accompanied these campaigns, an increasingly bellicose Bush administration threatened Iran and Syria and announced its ambition to remake the Middle East. The testosterone-charged mood was neatly captured in a remark by a British official who was said to be privy to the US government’s thinking at the time: ‘Everyone wants to go to Baghdad. Real men want to go to Tehran.’ At this moment, and in this context, intellectual boosters of the administration’s actions began to reach out to a larger audience by producing a flurry of opinion pieces, articles, and books that urged Americans to embrace their imperial destiny.

Those who have welcomed what they perceive to be an imperial America insist that its standing as the world’s sole superpower compels it to take up the burdens of empire. One of the most prominent proponents of this view is the historian Niall Ferguson, who calls on Americans to overcome their traditional distrust of empire, acknowledge its virtues as a stabilizing force in the world, and forthrightly project US power whenever and wherever necessary. Americans might ‘lack the imperial cast of mind’, he declares, but the United States ‘always had been an empire’. This assessment is shared by Max Boot, a historian by training and a senior fellow at the Council of Foreign Relations, who argues that the United States has fought plenty of ‘splendid little wars’ in the past, imperial interventions that provide models for the projection of force demanded by current circumstances. While the most explicit endorsements of an American empire have come from the political right, some liberal interventionists also have advocated the exercise of imperial power. Michael Ignatieff, for one, endorses ‘empire lite’, arguing that humanitarian crises and political disorder justify ‘imperial policing’ measures. At the core of the argument advanced

1. D. Remnick, ‘War without End?’, New Yorker, 21, 28 April 2003. In Britain, the prime minister, Tony Blair, and his advisers share the view of the Bush administration about the need for an assertive foreign policy that is unabashed by the label ‘imperial’. See R. Cooper, ‘Why We Still Need Empires’, Sunday Observer, 7 April 2002, accessed online.
by those who favour the assertion of imperial power by the United States is the premise that empire guarantees order and prosperity, while its absence generates disorder and poverty. Broadening Ferguson’s claim that the British Empire brought about ‘anglobalization’, the economist Deepak Lal makes the case that empires are essential for the promotion of globalization and economic growth.¹ Thomas P. M. Barnett, a military strategist at the Naval War College, contends that ‘gaps’ in globalization create regions of instability that compel the United States to play ‘Leviathan full-time’, an assessment of its obligations that has made him a ‘guru’ to officials in the Pentagon.² Similarly, the journalist Robert Kaplan insists that the United States has an obligation to dispatch its troops – he frankly refers to them as ‘imperial grunts’ – to trouble spots around the globe in order to keep at bay the Hobbesian threat of chaos and violence.³ How to find a way ‘to legitimize colonial rule by some other name, and to create institutions that can conduct it’ is the main challenge confronting the United States today, according to the influential neo-conservative foreign policy specialist Eliot Cohen.⁴ The National War College in Washington now offers its students a lecture and study programme on ‘Empires’.⁵ Though the Bush administration publicly protests that it has no imperial ambitions, privately it harbours other views: ‘We’re an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality,’ one White House official famously told a reporter: ‘We’re history’s actors . . . and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do.’⁶

The rest of us have indeed been left to study what they do, though this official could not have expected how quickly and vociferously the claims of empire would be turned against the administration. Books soon began to pour from the presses with titles like The Folly of Empire and Imperial Delusions, signalling their authors’ conviction that the administration is pursuing a policy of imperial aggression and hubris that can only come to an unhappy end.⁷ The negative connotations that the term empire has long

positions. For an early endorsement of empire as a vehicle of humanitarian intervention, see D. Rieff, ‘Liberal Imperialism’, World Policy Journal, xvi, 2 (Summer 1999), 1-10.


⁵ See http://www.nationalwarcollege.org/EMPIRES/


⁷ The following list of books includes only ones that refer to ‘empire’ or ‘imperialism’ in their titles: B. R. Barber, Fear’s Empire: War, Terrorism, and Democracy (New York, 2003); S. Landau, The Pre-Emptive Empire: A Guide to Bush’s Kingdom (London, 2003); M. Mann, Incoherent Empire (London, 2003); J. Newhouse, Imperial America: The Bush Assault on the World Order (New York, 2003); R. Burbach and J. Tarbell, Imperial Overstretch: George W. Bush and the Hubris of Empire (London,
carried in US political and popular discourse – consider President Ronald Reagan’s charge that the Soviet Union was an ‘evil empire’ or the designation of the villains in Star Wars films as the ‘Empire’ – echo throughout these works. The objections they raise are wide-ranging: an imperial United States sustains militarism and endless war; it encourages arrogance and provokes antagonism around the world; it drains the nation’s resources and distorts its economy; and it undermines the democratic foundations of the republic itself. Much of this literature draws its inspiration from leftist intellectual traditions. Perhaps the most prominent and certainly the most prolific of the leftist critics is Noam Chomsky, the famed linguist and political gadfly, who continues the project he originally launched as an opponent of the Vietnam War, seeking to expose the United States as a rogue state, its imperialist misadventures undermining the freedom and prosperity of peoples around the globe. The geographer David Harvey draws on classical Marxist interpretations of imperialism to argue that the United States’ actions are driven by the innate contradictions of modern capitalism. Other critics, however, come from different ideological backgrounds. Chalmers Johnson is an East Asian specialist who was one of the leading scholarly defenders of the American war in Vietnam, while Andrew Bacevich is a retired army colonel who made a new career as a professor of international relations. Both Johnson and Bacevich worry that the rise of an unrivalled, unrestrained military has set the United States on an imperialist course.

Perhaps the most striking feature of this proliferating, polemical literature is that both sides in the debate share the same premise: the United


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States is an empire. While some commentators continue to insist that the term empire does not accurately characterize the United States’ role in the world, they are a shrinking minority.1 The principal point of dispute now seems to come down to a moral question: is the American empire a good or a bad thing? A secondary issue is whether the aggressive assertion of US military power since 9/11 is a sign of strength or of weakness. As the US occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan have grown more troubled and costly, the debate has grown more one-sided, with the critics predominating and placing increasing emphasis on the limitations of US power.2 Recognizing that advocacy of empire has become ‘a losing political issue’, its proponents have grown less vocal of late, with one prominent neo-conservative even publicly proclaiming his change of heart.3 A more representative figure may be Ferguson, who concedes that the costs of American empire appear at present to exceed its benefits, but remains hopeful that ‘the calculus of power could swing back in its favor tomorrow.’4

So what do the two sides mean when they speak of the United States as an empire? For some, the designation is assumed to be self-evident, requiring no explanation or analysis. They rely on the word empire, along with its cognates imperial and imperialism, to do totemic duty, using it in their titles and texts to evoke awe or anger.5 This is most noticeable among those who are so preoccupied with US foreign policy since 9/11 that they lose sight both of earlier US interventions overseas, and of the experiences of previous empires. They tend to regard the present as a moment without parallel, a post-cold war ‘unipolar’ juncture at which the unrivalled predominance enjoyed by the United States has no equivalent in the past. Whether this is the ‘end of history’, a secular second (or in this case first) coming that announces the universal triumph of American values and institutions, or the era of ‘endless war’, brought on by an unbridled Pentagon determined to assert its power around the world, it is portrayed as a state of affairs that transcends anything other empires ever achieved.6

Even among the advocates of US exceptionalism, however, there is

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5 Newhouse, Imperial America; Landau, Pre-Emptive Empire.
6 F. Fukuyama, The End of History and the Last Man (New York, 1992); Boggs, Imperial Delusions.
some incentive to allude to past empires, if only to highlight what differentiates the United States. Glib comparisons with the Roman Empire are common.¹ More meaningful efforts to make sense of the United States as an empire must be more systematic in establishing its historical context and counterparts. The problem is that empire itself is such a pervasive but elusive historical term. The sheer variety of past polities that have been characterized as empires frustrates efforts to formulate a definition or typology that will apply to all cases. While most scholars are likely to agree that an empire refers to the authority exerted by a state or its agents over an ethnically diverse array of peoples, this understanding of the term is too general to mean much, accommodating as it does such different phenomena as the continent-wide conquests of the Mongols and the transoceanic extortions of the Portuguese. Moreover, even this definition may not be broad enough to account for the way the term has been used, for example, in reference to the loose affiliation of central European states known as the Holy Roman Empire or to the ‘shadow empires’ that arose along China’s steppe frontier.² As Dominic Lieven observes, ‘to write the history of empire would be close to writing the history of mankind.’³

How, then, can meaningful comparisons be drawn between the United States and past empires? Several recent works have brought together authorities on various past empires and colonies to take up this question. A collection of essays sponsored by the Social Science Research Council and a recent issue of Daedalus set the US experience in the context of the Russian, Ottoman, Chinese, French, and other empires. While both works are rich in insights, they are also riddled with differences in definitions of empire, in categories of comparison, and in conclusions about whether the United States should be regarded as an empire, and, if so, of what sort.⁴ Other historians examine the United States’ involvement in regions that have experienced imperial subjugation in the past.⁵ But even if US interventions in the Middle East and Central Asia bear some resemblance to the activities of earlier empires, one must ask how much can be extrapolated from events in particular locations about the broader character of empires.

In the most ambitious and learned work to take up the comparative

¹ Garrison, America as Empire; M. Walker, ‘What Kind of Empire?’, Wilson Quarterly, xxvi, no. 3 (2002), 96-49.
⁴ Lessons of Empire: Imperial Histories and American Power, ed. C. Calhoun, F. Cooper, and K. W. Moore (New York, 2006); Daedalus, cxxxiv, 2 (Spring 2005). See also the forum on ‘An American Empire?’, in Wilson Quarterly, xxvi, no. 3 (Summer 2003).
challenge, Charles S. Maier ranges across huge spans of history, identifies what he sees as the ‘recurring elements of empires and asks to what extent the United States shares these attributes’. Among the elements he finds most common are the maintenance of systems of inequality, tolerance for social and cultural heterogeneity, reliance on governance by collaborative elites, and, above all, persistent problems with frontiers, the ‘fault lines’ that mark the most open manifestations of imperial power and most clearly expose its limits. For Maier, ‘Rome remains the most compelling imperial model.’ Having produced a typology of empires in the first half of the book, he turns to the United States in the second, providing an illuminating if overly Europe-centred examination of its rise to global predominance. While Maier is reluctant to declare the United States to be an empire, he comes close: ‘The United States reveals many, but not all – at least not yet – of the traits that have distinguished empires.’

Maya Jasanoff observes that empires ‘build on the structures and policies of their predecessors’. The United States’ immediate predecessor was the British Empire, and it should be the first case to which we turn for meaningful historical comparisons. The extent to which the United States has drawn on the structures and policies of the British Empire reveals a great deal about its pursuit of imperial power. It came into existence by breaking away from the British Empire, but it retained many of the institutional and doctrinal traditions of its erstwhile sovereign. It marshalled these traditions to new purposes as it expanded across the continent and turned its attention abroad. With Britain’s retreat from empire in the second half of the twentieth century, the United States became its most obvious heir, filling the economic and military vacuum that its decline left in the international arena while finding new ways to exert influence over its former colonies. Now the United States finds itself occupying several countries that Britain occupied in the past. The length and lingering bonds of this relationship suggest that much can be learned about the United States as an empire by comparing it to the British Empire.

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A New Yorker profile of Douglas Feith, one of the neo-conservatives who helped, as the Pentagon’s under-secretary of defence for policy, to plan the invasion of Iraq, noted in passing that his personal library was ‘weighted

disproportionately to the history of the British Empire, and Feith has spent many hours schooling himself in the schemes and follies of the British on the playing fields of the Middle East. Although it is tempting to conclude that Feith learned little from his studies, the most intriguing aspect of the anecdote is the fact that he looked to the British imperial experience for lessons in the first place.

Feith was hardly alone. In the period immediately surrounding the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, a flurry of opinion pieces turned for perspective on US policy to Britain’s earlier involvement in these countries. Since then, a steady stream of commentaries continue to compare the United States’ actions today to those of Britain in its imperial heyday. Many of them come from historians who have either studied the British Empire itself or some region of the world that was once under its sway. We have two books from Ferguson, one on the British Empire, the other on the American, with the first explicitly intended as a lesson for the second (though the lesson is so starkly divorced from the historical account that it might more accurately be described as a homily). We have critical cameos from Caroline Elkins, who warns that those who urge US strategists in Iraq to emulate the British counter-insurgency campaign in Malaya fail to acknowledge its brutal, repressive nature, and William Dalrymple, who observes that the US overthrow of Saddam Hussein resembles the British destruction of Tipu Sultan in its cynical and ruthless war-mongering. We have cautionary tales from Juan Cole, Rashid Khalidi, Karl Meyer, and Edward Ingram, each of whom warns that the United States is following in the Middle East and Central Asia in the fateful footsteps of the British, whose failures it may be doomed to repeat. And we have an overview from Linda Colley, who reminds us that the United States’ origins and dreams of greatness were conceived in terms of empire and evolved in relationship to the British Empire, which was at once model, nemesis, and ally.

3 Ferguson, Empire; Ferguson, Colossus. For a penetrating critique of the first book, see F. Cooper, ‘Empires Multiplied’, Comparative Studies of History and Society, xlvii (2004), 947-79.
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The most sustained reflection on what the British experience reveals about the current American empire comes from Bernard Porter in a sweeping if idiosyncratic analysis of the two states' roles as global powers. Despite his pretense that he has no wish to judge whether the United States is an empire ("Imperialism" is only a word, after all, the title and content of the book indicate otherwise: it is not merely an empire, but a 'superempire', far surpassing Britain in power and ambition. The distinction is central to his argument, which stresses the differences rather than the similarities between the two empires. Even though he echoes many of the concerns critics have voiced about the administration of George W. Bush, he is no more enamoured of their efforts to condemn its policies through analogy to the British imperial experience than of its defenders' efforts to endorse them by the same means.

Where Porter stretches credulity is in his determination to downplay the power and influence of the British Empire. It was, he claims, a 'cheapskate empire' that only managed to expand as far, and last as long, as it did because of 'luck', 'bluff', and the occasional dose of 'repression', which itself was a sign of 'fear ... or of weakness', although he concedes that it may not have seemed so to those who were being repressed. Like Ferguson, Porter believes that imperial power is a matter of will-power, but whereas Ferguson asserts that the British had it, Porter is convinced that they did not. Reprising the argument advanced in an earlier book, The Absent-Minded Imperialists, he asserts that the British had little interest in their empire and lacked any genuine 'imperial "will"'. Hence, the British Empire was a troubled, tottering entity, 'pre-programmed' to fail.

When a historian brings both chance and fate into his argument, and caps it off with claims about national character, alarm bells ring. Porter also turns to national character to explain how the United States became a 'superempire'. Again staking a position in opposition to Ferguson, he insists that Americans have the will for empire that their diffident British cousins lacked. They acquired it, he suggests, in the early colonists' wars against native peoples, which imbued Americans with a 'masculinist' mentality that found expression in ruthlessness and a proclivity for violence. This explains why US cities are so dangerous and the US military is so powerful. As polemic, this is a rousing read but as historical analysis it leaves a lot to be desired.

Rather than join in the argument between Porter and Ferguson about...

2 Ibid., pp. 34, 37, 38, 39.
4 Porter, Empire, pp. 88, 92.
whether Americans or Britons have more of the backbone needed for empire, we would do better to look for more analytically and historically meaningful ways of measuring the two empires against one another. Michael Mann, a historical sociologist whose critique of current US foreign policy was one of the first to view it in terms of empire (albeit an incoherent one, as his provocative title proclaims), suggests that imperial power has four distinct dimensions: political, military, economic, and ideological. Even though the ideological dimension needs to be broadened to include cultural power, Mann’s four categories provide a useful framework for addressing the question of how the American empire does and does not resemble its British predecessor.

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The most commonly cited difference between the British Empire and its US successor has to do with the way in which each has exerted political power. The British Empire was first and foremost a colonial empire, famously represented in those maps that coloured its far-flung possessions in red. At its fullest territorial extent in the aftermath of the First World War, the British Empire held sway over the Indian subcontinent, vast swathes of Africa, large parts of South-East Asia and the Middle East, as well as Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and countless smaller territories around the globe. Though these disparate lands were ruled in different ways, with the ones populated mainly by peoples of British stock enjoying rights to self-governance not granted to the lands inhabited mainly by African, Asian, and other non-Western peoples, all were political dependencies of Britain, acknowledging the Crown as their sovereign.

The United States, by contrast, has shown far less inclination to acquire colonies, even though, from the beginning, it was constantly seeking to expand its borders, incorporating territory previously claimed by Spain, France, Mexico, and Russia while sweeping aside Native American communities in ruthless campaigns of displacement or destruction. As many historians have noted, this westward march across the continent bore striking similarities to settler expansion in South Africa, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, not least in terms of the settlers’ harsh treatment of the indigenous inhabitants. It is standard practice to apply the term

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1 Mann, Incoherent Empire, p. 13.
2 The emphasis on the formal empire was enshrined in The Cambridge History of the British Empire, 9 vols., ed. E. A. Benians et al. (Cambridge, 1929-59) and persists in works such as 1. O. Lloyd, The British Empire, 1558-1995, 2nd ed. (Oxford, 1996).
4 M. Adas, ‘From Settler Colony to Global Hegemon: Integrating the Exceptionalist Narrative of the American Experience in World History’, American Historical Review, cxi (2001), 1692-720; The Fron-
colonialism to the latter cases, but the term presents problems in the United States context: while Native Americans may have been subjected to a form of ‘internal colonialism’, the territories taken from them were not politically subordinated to the conquering state, but incorporated within it.1

Once the United States reached the limits of its continental expansion, it did make a sudden bid for the sort of overseas colonial empire that Britain possessed. Starting in 1897, it seized numerous territories, including Hawaii, the Philippines, Puerto Rico, eastern Samoa, Guam, the Panama Canal Zone, and, briefly, Cuba, where the most enduring legacy of its imperial ambitions is the now notorious prison at Guantanamo.2 This colonial empire was small by British standards (in part, perhaps, because it came later), and of shorter duration: Hawaii, for example, was eventually granted statehood (equivalent, in some ways, to the unrealized ambitions of British imperial federationists, who sought the political incorporation of colonies like Canada and Australia into a Greater Britain), while the Philippines became self-governing in 1935 and independent in 1946. By the Second World War, the United States had become a critic of European colonial rule and the principal architect of a post-war international order that was premised on the eventual extension of national sovereignty to all peoples.3

For those who equate imperialism with colonialism, these developments show that the United States, even if it had imperial ambitions in the past, gave them up as it came into its own as a world power. Some proponents of an American empire make the same connection, but instead of applauding the fact that most of the US colonial system was dismantled, they urge its revival on a grander scale. Their romantic nostalgia for colonial rule is evident in Boot’s oft-quoted remark about those ‘troubled lands’ that ‘cry out for the sort of enlightened foreign administration once provided by self-confident Englishmen in jodhpurs and pith helmets’.4

The preoccupation with colonialism as the measure of empire ignores the fact that the British themselves preferred whenever possible to exert political power over other peoples through less intrusive means that direct

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1 The experiences of American Indians may be more comparable with the incorporation of Britain’s Celtic fringe, as detailed by M. Hechter, Internal Colonialism: The Celtic Fringe in British National Development (London, 1975).


4 Boot, ‘Case for American Power’.
rule. Historians have long recognized that Britain extended its reach well beyond the territories coloured red on maps, coercing many formally independent countries to submit to its will. China saw its political autonomy so severely eroded in the nineteenth century by ‘the triple assault’ of gunboat diplomacy, predatory capitalism, and missionary zealotry that it became the poster child for what is commonly referred to as Britain’s informal empire. The Ottoman Empire, Persia, and various Latin American states also came under coercive pressure from Britain. In each of these cases, there is ambiguity about where to draw the line between influence and imperialism. Elsewhere, however, the line was clear, and clearly crossed. A few examples should suffice. Although the Persian Gulf protectorates of Kuwait, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates (Trucial States) were purportedly autonomous polities, their affairs were overseen by British imperial agents. A more significant case was Egypt, where the British maintained the pretence for decades after their invasion in 1882 that they administered the country on behalf of the khedive, whose state remained nominally part of the Ottoman Empire. Across the globe, the British imposed various forms of indirect rule over putatively independent states.

The United States has adopted similar strategies in many of its dealings with other countries. Caribbean and Central American neighbours have been the frequent targets of US gunboat diplomacy and other instruments of informal imperialism. On various occasions over the past century, the United States has invaded Cuba, Haiti, the Dominican Republic, Panama, Nicaragua, Honduras, Grenada, and other countries in the region, impeding revolutions, overthrowing governments, and installing rulers amenable to its interests. The subservient regimes that resulted have been dismissively characterized as banana republics. Since the Second World War, the United States’ efforts to surround itself with client states have extended across the globe, resulting in strategies that ranged from financial assistance and military advisers for friendly governments, to economic sanctions and CIA-sponsored coups against unfriendly ones. Whether the largesse that the United States lavishes on a country like Egypt (currently the second largest beneficiary of US foreign aid) amounts to informal imperialism is open to debate, but surely the coups carried out at the United States’ behest in Iran in 1953 and Guatemala in 1954 are proof of this phenomenon. The ‘status of force’ agreements that exempt US personnel


2 S. Kiszek, Overthrow: America’s Century of Regime Change from Hawaii to Iraq (New York, 2006).
stationed in other countries from their laws and passport and immigration controls have been compared to the extraterritorial agreements that Britain imposed on China, the Ottoman Empire, and other states whose political autonomy it had eroded.1

Porter argues that the United States prefers informal to formal empire because its ruling class is capitalist to the core, whereas Britain forged a formal empire because it remained under the thrall of an atavistic aristocratic elite that liked to lord it over other peoples. But the contrast in elites’ intentions should not be exaggerated: John Gallagher and Ronald Robinson reminded us long ago that the British only turned to colonial conquest in the nineteenth century when they ran out of other options.2 A more compelling explanation for the divergent courses taken by the two empires has to do with the different global environments within which they operated. The British faced less congenial conditions for the advance of their capitalist interests in various parts of the world than does the United States, which enjoys the benefits of communication infrastructures, market systems, and co-operative regimes that often came into being as a result of British colonial rule. And the growing array of competitors that confronted Britain in the late nineteenth century set off an unseemly and unprecedented scramble for colonial possessions. The United States, by contrast, ascended to global predominance in the context of the European empires’ decay and dissolution as a result of the Second World War, giving it and its rival, the Soviet Union, an incentive to condemn colonialism and promote the nation-state as the only political unit worthy of recognition in international relations.

The United States’ interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq have generated talk of empire at least in part because they so eerily echo the British imperial experience in these countries. Paul Bremer, the US administrator of Iraq until limited sovereignty was restored in 2004, may not have worn a plumed helmet, but he certainly adopted the demeanour and wielded the power of a British proconsul.3 And Hamid Karzai may be the elected president of a putatively independent Afghanistan, but he is widely regarded as a puppet whose administration ‘effectively remains an extension of the US government’.4 What makes the likeness to an earlier empire’s involvement in these countries all the more striking is that the British themselves dis-

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3 Though a remarkably incompetent one, according to R. Chandrasekaran, Imperial Life in the Emerald City: Inside Iraq’s Green Zone (New York, 2006).
avowed any desire to claim them as colonies. Although the British invaded Afghanistan on three separate occasions (1839, 1878, and 1919), the outcome they sought was not direct rule, but the installation of an emir who would be amenable to their geopolitical concerns. And although the British occupied Iraq during the First World War and assumed its governance afterwards, they operated under the international sanction of a League of Nations mandate from 1920 and served a state whose official ruler from 1921 was King Faisal, the Hashemite wartime ally whose accession to the throne they had engineered. No one now questions that these were acts of imperialism, but they were conducted by means that maintained the pretense that Afghans and Iraqis enjoyed political autonomy. Is it any wonder that the US presence in these countries has given rise to similar charges?

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The military might that the United States recently brought to bear on Afghanistan and Iraq also occupies a central place in the debate about US imperialism. Force is an integral feature of all empires, as Maier observes in an apt aphorism: 'The life-blood of empires is blood.' The stunning speed with which US forces overthrew the Taliban in Afghanistan and the Baathist regime in Iraq set off a scramble among commentators to coin a new term to describe its military supremacy: 'hyperpower', 'überpower', and 'superempire' are offered up as replacements for a now passé 'superpower'. Some of this slack-jawed awe has lessened as the United States has become bogged down in bloody counter-insurgency campaigns in both countries. Even so, the Pentagon’s dream of 'full spectrum dominance', its phrase for unchallenged military superiority, seems about as close to being realized as such chimeras can be. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the United States now devotes more of its budget to military expenditures than all the other major powers combined. Its forces 'garrison the globe' with at least 725 military bases in at least 38 countries (some bases and their hosts being kept secret), serving as the logistical launching pads for surveillance activities, covert operations, constabulary missions, and military measures of other sorts. These efforts are overseen by an oligarchy of commanders-in-chief (Bacevich calls them 'uniformed consuls'), each of whom has jurisdiction over a major region of the world –

1 J. Siegel, Endgame: Britain, Russia, and the Final Struggle for Central Asia (London, 2002), refers to Afghanistan as a 'semi-protectorate'.
3 Maier, Among Empires, p. 20.
4 Cohen, 'History and the Hyperpower'; J. Joffe, Überpower: The Imperial Temptation of America (New York, 2006); Porter, Empire.
5 Johnson, Sorrows, pp. 1154.
the Pacific and East Asia, Europe and North Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America. Their commands, in effect, encompass the entire globe.

This colossal military enterprise is foremost in the minds of most of the commentators who refer to the United States as an empire. For many of them, it is 'a new form of empire', one whose power so far surpasses that of any past empire that it stands in a class all its own. If power is measured in terms of sheer destructive force, this is no doubt true, but it is a truth that simply speaks to the cumulative advances in military technology. By this measure, it could be claimed that contemporary Britain, with its nuclear arsenal and other sophisticated weaponry, is more powerful than its imperial forebear, a proposition that is meaningless. Military power, like any other kind of power, must be measured in relative terms, set against the countervailing forces it confronts. Understood as such, the question that needs to be asked is how the power the United States has wielded relative to its rivals compares with the power the British Empire wielded relative to the rivals it faced. There is no readily available calculus for answering this question. Historians are deeply divided, for example, in their views of when and why the British Empire began to decline, an issue made more challenging still by the fact that military power is inextricably bound up with political and economic power. This should not prevent us, however, from making some general comparative observations about the military resources available to the two empires and how they have been used to project power.

As the iconic lyrics to 'Rule Britannia' proclaimed, it was above all because the Royal Navy 'ruled the waves' that the British were both free and free to exert their will on other peoples around the world. The navy's ability to patrol the seas and to project force along coasts and navigable rivers made it an intimidating instrument of imperial power in the nineteenth century, able at its peak to safeguard the smooth operation of the

3 Some political scientists may disagree: see the table that quantifies the decline of British naval power in W. R. Thompson, 'Martian and Venusian Perspectives on International Relations: Britain as System Leader in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries', in *Bridges and Boundaries: Historians, Political Scientists, and the Study of International Relations*, ed. C. Elman and M. F. Elman (Cambridge, MA, 2003), p. 987.
global system of trade that Britain depended upon, as well as to coerce those recalcitrant or belligerent states that interfered with its interests and ambitions. In the United States' arsenal, air power (understood to include satellites and land- and sea-based missiles) can be viewed as the equivalent to the Royal Navy. It carries greater destructive punch, but only in the aftermath of the Soviet Union's disintegration has it attained the unquestioned superiority over its rivals that the British navy enjoyed through much of the nineteenth century. US air power does not face the same constraints that British sea power did in its dealings with land powers like Russia and Germany. Still, it has serious limitations of its own, as the current insurgencies in Iraq and Afghanistan demonstrate, and it requires a similar network of bases around the world to supply its forces and stage their strikes. The United States 'empire of bases', which stretches from Guam to Guantanamo, would have been instantly intelligible to Victorian lords of the admiralty, whose own Indian Ocean outpost of Diego Garcia has become a key air base for American forces.

If we turn to land power, the US military seems far more formidable relative to its rivals than the British military ever was. Its forces are unmatched by any other army today in terms of training, armaments, and logistics, if not sheer numbers. The British army, on the other hand, was puny compared to the armies of the great continental European states, and it was indifferently armed and equipped. It was, however, well suited to the colonial warfare it conducted with numbing frequency against Asian and African forces, enabling Colonel C. E. Callwell to distil the military lessons his countrymen had learned from these campaigns in his classic *Small Wars*. Britain's technological superiority over its non-Western foes resulted on occasion in outcomes like the Sudan campaign of 1898, where its forces wreaked a late-Victorian version of 'shock and awe'. Furthermore, Britain was able to overcome many of its domestic manpower limitations by drawing on overseas resources, the most important of which was its 'English barracks in an Oriental sea', the Indian army, which was one of the largest armies in the world. When mercenary auxiliaries like the Gurkhas and a host of other colonial forces are added to the list (nearly twenty locally enlisted overseas forces were commanded by seconded British officers in the early twentieth century), the British had a huge reservoir of manpower available for constabulary duties across the globe.

2 Johnson, *Sorrows*, p. 23.
US military doctrine appears in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union to be shifting towards a strikingly similar conception of its forces' future role. Barnett argues that the United States can expect to fight numerous wars in the near future, small wars in 'failed' states in which security has broken down and 'subversive' elements have gained a foothold. One study has counted nearly fifty military interventions by the United States in the decade between 1989 and 1999, compared to just sixteen during the cold war. Expecting many more, the former secretary of defence, Donald Rumsfeld, pushed the Pentagon to restructure its forces into smaller, more mobile units better prepared to meet multiple low-level threats. The Pentagon also has turned increasingly to private firms such as Dycorp, run by retired military men, to carry out logistical and security tasks as 'subcontractors', which is little more than a euphemism for mercenaries. In 2003-4, it spent $750 million on private contractor services in Iraq alone. In addition, troops from countries like Mongolia have been well rewarded by the United States for their participation in the 'coalition of the willing' that occupies Iraq (where the Mongols made their last memorable appearance in 1258). While these US military initiatives are driven by their own dynamics and circumstances, they share some of the strategic and structural characteristics of a British military that was designed to maintain an empire.

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Military force is usually regarded as the measure of last resort in international relations, undertaken when states fail to achieve their objectives by other means. Among the most important of those objectives for imperial Britain was the advancement of its global economic interests. The first country to experience an industrial revolution, Britain became 'the workshop of the world' in the nineteenth century, producing the preponderance of the cotton textiles, iron and steel products, and other manufactured goods that entered the global marketplace. It also built the ships that moved these goods from domestic producer to overseas consumer, and it controlled the shipping lanes along which they travelled. The profits it accumulated turned the City of London into the world's financial centre.

1 Barnett, Pentagon's New Map.
2 Eland, Empire Has No Clothes, p. 13.
6 M. B. Young, 'Imperial Language', in New American Empire, ed. Gardner and Young, p. 44.
and made sterling the standard measure for international currency exchange. Although Britain’s manufacturing sector began to retreat from its position of predominance under the growing competition from the United States, Germany, and other newly industrialized states in the late nineteenth century, its finance, services, and commercial sectors remained strong until the international economy collapsed with the onset of the Great Depression. Britain’s power waxed and waned with its international economic standing.

The classic theories of imperialism advanced by J. A. Hobson and Vladimir Lenin arose out of their desire to explain the workings of this relationship. While particulars of their interpretations have been discredited, their insistence that capitalism often acted in tandem with imperialism has not. Peter Cain and A. G. Hopkins argue that British imperialism was intimately associated with the needs of metropolitan capitalist interests, particularly from the financial and service sectors. While the precise causal relationship between the various sectors of the British economy and the various manifestations of imperial power remains a matter of debate, most historians agree that the correspondence between the two was no accident: the forces that made Britain a capitalist powerhouse are inexorably entangled with those that made it an imperial titan.

The United States became the engine that drove the global economy after the Second World War. US capital fuelled the post-war revival of international trade and US factories met the pent-up demand for consumer goods. Wall Street replaced the City of London as the world’s main money market and the dollar replaced sterling as its default currency. This economic ascendancy supplied the United States with a surplus of what has been called ‘soft power’, the ability to exert its will in indirect and informal ways. Maier, who refers to the United States as a ‘post-territorial empire’, attributes its power to the unrivalled capacity it exhibited after the Second World War for mass production and, recently, for mass consumption, which it has financed through a feedback loop of credit from countries whose own economic growth is dependent on US consumers’ continued demand for their goods. Whether this system can be sustained is uncertain, but it has managed for the moment to ensure that the United States is ‘the indispensable nation’, if not in the self-satisfied sense that Madeleine Albright implied when she coined the phrase as secretary of state in the Clinton administration. For commentators such as Lal and Ferguson, the

3 Maier, Among Empires, p. 107.
The American Empire

United States is indispensable to the world economy, providing the imperial oversight that makes globalization possible. Others, while agreeing with the imperial designation, argue that the United States has ‘gamed’ the rules of international trade to give itself an unfair advantage. It has done so, they suggest, both by engaging in direct coercion of other states through trade and credit sanctions, and by relying on organizations like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund to police their economic behaviour.¹

Although the international economic environment over which the United States holds sway differs in many respects from the one the British dealt with in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the two states have espoused a similar set of liberal economic doctrines that stress the benefits of free trade and safeguards for private property.² As the dominant partners in their respective systems of trade, both Britain and the United States have stood to gain from the expansion of those systems through the liberalization of economic practices in other countries, giving them an incentive to lever weaker states and societies that resist such practices. Sometimes, the leverage has taken the form of gunboat diplomacy, at others the subtler manipulations of the sterling area and US dollar diplomacy, but invariably it has advanced the economic interests of the two empires.

For all its importance, the economics of imperialism has played a subordinate role in the current debate about the United States as an empire. David Harvey’s neo-Marxist analysis may be the only notable contribution that draws explicitly on classic theories of imperialism, but his dark warning that the Bush administration’s belligerence is evidence of a structural crisis in capitalism is no less strained and unconvincing than Lal’s sunny faith in the United States as the armed agent of globalization.³ Various commentators have noted the importance of oil to US policy in Iraq, though they rarely offer any analysis of the political economy of modern capitalism’s most critical resource.⁴ A second aspect of the economics of empire that deserves more attention is the ‘military-industrial complex’ that President Dwight D. Eisenhower famously warned against in his farewell address.⁵ Though the phrase is inextricably associated with

3 Harvey, New Imperialism.
4 A notable exception is M. T. Klare, Blood and Oil: The Dangers and Consequences of America’s Growing Petroleum Dependency (New York, 2004).
5 See J. Carroll’s epic House of War: The Pentagon and the Disastrous Rise of American Power (Boston,
the nexus of forces that arose in the United States after the Second World War, an earlier configuration of the phenomenon reared its head in imperial Britain. One reason why Hobson’s work remains worth reading today is its analysis of the arms merchants, mining magnates, military officers, and other interest groups that gained professional advantages out of the imperial wars Britain waged and the colonial territories it won. A similar study needs to be done about the private firms that benefited from the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. The press has given intermittent attention to the government contracts awarded to Halliburton, the conglomerate previously piloted by the vice-president, Dick Cheney, but other consultants and contractors were awarded contracts to restart oil fields, rebuild bridges and buildings, and provide private security and prison guards (including some of those involved in the Abu Ghraib prison scandal). An analysis of this huge and expanding ‘military-industrial complex’ is one way to connect the economic dimension of US policy to its military imperatives. It also points to intriguing parallels with the British imperial experience.

Lastly, Mann notes the importance of ideological power, to which should be added cultural power. Here, too, the British experience offers useful comparisons with the US one. All empires offer an ideological rationale for their rule over other peoples, invariably condensed in the claim that they are carrying out a civilizing mission. The British saw their mission as a liberal one, freeing their colonial subjects from the shackles of tradition and tyranny through the introduction of good government and legal rights, commerce and Christianity, medicine and modern education, and other emblems of Western modernity. This determination to lead the ‘poor benighted heathen’ to the promised land of civilization was famously expressed by Rudyard Kipling in his poem ‘The White Man’s Burden’, written for his American cousins as they set out to acquire an overseas empire at the end of the nineteenth century. While the British themselves often failed to heed Kipling’s call to ‘fill the mouth of Famine and bid the sickness cease,’ we cannot dismiss such rhetoric as empty or hypocritical. Its moral injunctions had a powerful hold on the political imaginations of the empire’s expatriate agents and it influenced the attitudes of local Westernized elites as well. The liberal ideology with its promise of progress

2006).
1 Hobson, Imperialism, part 2, ch. 1.
gave the British imperial project a hegemonic strength that it would never have achieved had it relied on brute force.

The United States crafted its own technocratic version of this civilizing mission, as Michael Adas shows.1 It honed a rhetoric of development and modernization that held great appeal, especially after the Second World War, when the US economy dominated the international scene. According to Harry Harootunian, the desire by the George W. Bush administration to remake the Middle East harks back to this post-war confidence in the United States' modernizing mission.2 Its lineage, however, can be traced to the liberal roots that informed the British rationale for reforming other societies. Cole notes the parallels between the United States' insistence that its purpose in Iraq is to bring the benefits of political and economic liberty and the liberal rhetoric the British used to justify their invasion and occupation of Egypt in 1882 (which itself echoed Napoleon's pronouncements when his army invaded Egypt in 1798). The theme trumpeted in 2004 in Bush's second inaugural address was that the United States had an obligation to advance the cause of liberty around the world (the words freedom and liberty appear twenty-five times and thirteen times respectively in the speech). Although it seems counter-intuitive to associate liberty with empire, Edward Rhodes demonstrates in his penetrating analysis of Bush's 'grand strategy' that its crusading ambitions are profoundly imperial in nature.3

Some political theorists aver that imperialism is integral to liberal doctrine, coded into its core universalist principles. They argue that liberalism inherited from John Locke a legacy of excluding certain classes of peoples from political participation on the basis of their presumed incapacity for reason.4 Like women at home, non-Western colonial peoples were often characterized by their British masters as the equivalent of children, incapable in their current condition of governing themselves. Because Americans had less incentive to impose colonial rule over other peoples, they have had less recourse to such rhetoric abroad, though it certainly informed their commentary on Filipinos and Haitians, among others, in the early twentieth century. Its echo could be heard in May 2004 in the patronizing remark Bush made to Republican senators that it was time 'to take the training wheels off' the Iraqi government.5 The statement also affirms,

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1 M. Adas, *Dominance by Design: Technological Imperatives and America's Civilizing Mission* (Cambridge, MA, 2006).
2 Harootunian, *Empire's New Clothes*.
however, liberalism's promise that anyone who meets its universalist standards will be welcomed as a free and autonomous being.

No such promise is offered by the most extreme variant of exclusionism, racism, which insists on the irreducible otherness of its objects. Most empires face conflicting pressures to incorporate and differentiate subject populations, but these tensions have been most pronounced in liberal empires. Thomas Metcalf observes that British India experienced an 'enduring tension between two ideals, one of similarity and the other of difference'. Even though Queen Victoria's proclamation in 1858 establishing Crown rule over India promised to treat Indians in an 'equal and impartial' manner, many of her countrymen in India failed to keep that promise. Racism was most pronounced in colonies in which white settlers competed with indigenous peoples and non-white immigrants for land, labour, and other resources. Here arose what Patrick Wolfe terms the 'logic of elimination', which did so much to determine the fate of American Indians. At the same time, American settlers' demands for African slave labour gave rise to a long-enduring system of institutionalized racism toward blacks in the United States. Does its dual heritage make the American empire more racist than its British predecessor? Porter thinks so. But the American empire has never sought to establish the kinds of settler colonies that gave impetus to racist strategies of exclusion. To be sure, the United States' overseas ventures have been marked by racism in both attitude and action -- for example, the use of the derogatory terms 'gooks' during the Vietnam War and 'rag-heads' during the first Gulf War. But racial doctrines of exclusion have never posed a serious challenge to liberal principles of incorporation in the United States' idea and practice of empire.

The most striking feature of the ideological and cultural forces that are currently shaping the United States' stance towards the world is the informal alliance of secular neo-conservatives with Christian fundamentalists. Porter is one of the few commentators to note this curious convergence of interests. He sees the neo-conservatives, among whom he detects the 'resonances of fascism', and the evangelical right, whose views he con-

3 'Proclamation by the Queen in Council to the Princes, Chiefs, and People of India', 1 Nov. 1858 [London, British Library, Oriental and India Office Collections], MSS Eur. D620.
5 Porter, Empire, p. 120.
siders to be marked by ‘madness’, joining together to give US foreign policy a newly messianic character.\(^1\) Porter treats this development as confirmation that the United States' imperial ambitions are at odds with the pragmatism of Britons. In fact, the ideological alliance resembles the one that formed in the early nineteenth century between the Utilitarians, rational secularists driven by the desire for radical political change, and Evangelicals, religious advocates of moral reform. Despite their differences, they found common ground in the determination to transform Indian society, introducing Western educational and legal institutions, and abolishing suttee (the burning of widows) and other practices deemed morally reprehensible.\(^2\) In both cases, the ambitions of these improbable partners are both deeply idealistic and profoundly ethnocentric.

One further thread of continuity joins the British ideological rationale for empire with the arguments many Americans have made to justify the occupation of Afghanistan (though not Iraq). The British believed that the status of women in a society was one of the key indicators of where it stood on the ladder of civilization. Primitive societies oppressed women; civilized ones privileged them.\(^3\) One of the most compelling moral arguments that the Bush administration made for the invasion of Afghanistan was that it would free Afghani women from the oppressive Taliban regime. (The argument gained far less purchase in Iraq, where the Baathist regime’s treatment of women had been among the most progressive in the region.) But even if the US occupation has brought Afghan women greater opportunities for schooling and obstetric care, among other services, the achievement cannot be divorced from the brute force of empire. The connection was made clear in February 2005 in comments by Lieutenant-General James Mattis of the Marine Corps: ‘You go to Afghanistan, you got guys who slap women around for five years because they didn’t wear a veil. You know, guys like that ain’t got no manhood left anyway. So it’s a hell of a lot of fun to shoot them.’\(^4\) Is there a better illustration of the bargains and tensions that underlie the imperial project?

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WASHINGTON, DC IS A CITY WHOSE MASSIVE CLASSICAL BUILDINGS, GLEAMING WHITE MONUMENTS, GRANDLY APPOINTED MALL, AND OTHER SPLENDORS UNMISTAKABLY PROCLAIM ITS STATUS AS AN IMPERIAL CAPITAL. MORE THAN A CENTURY OF

\(^1\) Porter, Empire, pp. 109, 112.
\(^2\) Metcalf, Ideologies, ch. 2.
planning and building have made this city what it is today, a physical testament to the empire that was the ambition and achievement of successive generations of national leaders. The point is this: an American empire was not the immaculate conception of the neo-conservatives and their allies after the 2000 presidential election. The United States has exerted its awesome powers around the world in various ways for a long time. In some respects, it has done so differently from empires in the past, but there has never been a universally recognized template for how empires should act. By comparing the American empire with the British Empire, we can differentiate between the aspects of its experience that resemble its most important predecessor on the world stage and those that make it stand apart.

The United States has been a different kind of empire at different periods in its history, reflecting the various ways its own power and the forces set against it have changed. The present debate about American empire has been precipitated by the Bush administration's adoption of a posture and policies that differ significantly from those of its immediate predecessors. The differences can be characterized in terms of the distinction between the words 'empire' and 'imperialism'.1 The ideological agenda advanced by the administration's neo-conservatives and the opportunity that 9/11 gave them to carry it out entailed a move to an active form of empire we call imperialism. War has always tended to encourage imperial ambitions and reveal them to the world: the 'war against terrorism' is no different. The US government in the past half dozen years has taken a more unilateral stance in international relations, made more aggressive use of military power, and shown greater disregard for international law. The 2003 invasion of Iraq, an unprovoked war against another sovereign state, saw the culmination of these developments. If this is not imperialism of the sort the British practised in their heyday, it is hard to know what is. The United States has been an empire for some time, but it is now unabashedly an empire that dares not only to speak its name, as some would have it, but to act untrammeled in its pursuit of an imperial agenda.

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1 I thank Marilyn Young for helping me to sharpen this distinction.