

# *The Case for American Empire. The Most Realistic Response to Terrorism is for America to embrace its Imperial Role*

by Max Boot

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MANY HAVE SUGGESTED THAT THE September 11 attack on America was payback for U.S. imperialism. If only we had not gone around sticking our noses where they did not belong, perhaps we would not now be contemplating a crater in lower Manhattan. The solution is obvious: The United States must become a kinder, gentler nation, must eschew quixotic missions abroad, must become, in Pat Buchanan's phrase, "a republic, not an empire." In fact this analysis is exactly backward: The September 11 attack was a result of insufficient American involvement and ambition; the solution is to be more expansive in our goals and more assertive in their implementation.

It has been said, with the benefit of faulty hindsight, that America erred in providing the mujahedeen with weapons and training that some of them now turn against us. But this was amply justified by the exigencies of the Cold War. The real problem is that we pulled out of Afghanistan after 1989. In so doing, the George H.W. Bush administration was following a classic realpolitik policy. We had gotten involved in this distant nation to wage a proxy war against the Soviet Union. Once that larger war was over, we could safely pull out and let the Afghans resolve their own affairs. And if the consequence was the rise of the Taliban--homicidal mullahs driven by a hatred of modernity itself--so what? Who cares who rules this flyspeck in Central Asia? So said the wise elder statesmen. The "so what" question has now been answered definitively; the answer lies in the rubble of the World Trade Center and Pentagon.

We had better sense when it came to the Balkans, which could without much difficulty have turned into another Afghanistan. When Muslim Bosnians rose up against Serb oppression in the early 1990s, they received support from many of the same Islamic extremists who also backed the mujahedeen in Afghanistan. The Muslims of Bosnia are not particularly fundamentalist--after years of Communist rule, most are not all that religious--but they might have been seduced by the siren song of the mullahs if no one else had come to champion their cause. Luckily, someone else did. NATO and the United States intervened to stop the fighting in Bosnia, and later in Kosovo. Employing its leverage, the U.S. government pressured the Bosnian government into expelling the mujahedeen. Just last week, NATO and Bosnian police arrested four men in Sarajevo suspected of links to international terrorist groups. Some Albanian hotheads next tried to stir up trouble in Macedonia, but, following the dispatch of a NATO peacekeeping force, they have now been pressured to lay down their arms. U.S. imperialism--a liberal and humanitarian imperialism, to be sure, but imperialism all the same--appears to have paid off in the Balkans.

The problem is that, while the Clinton administration eventually did something right in the Balkans, elsewhere it was scandalously irresolute in the assertion of U.S. power. By cutting and running from Somalia after the deaths of 18 U.S. soldiers, Bill Clinton fostered a widespread impression that we could be chased out of a country by anyone

who managed to kill a few Americans. (Ronald Reagan did much the same thing by pulling out of Lebanon after the 1983 bombing of the U.S. Marine barracks.) After the attacks on the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998, Clinton sent cruise missiles--not soldiers--to strike a symbolic blow against bin Laden's training camps in Afghanistan and a pharmaceutical factory in Sudan. Those attacks were indeed symbolic, though not in the way Clinton intended. They symbolized not U.S. determination but rather passivity in the face of terrorism. And this impression was reinforced by the failure of either Bill Clinton or George W. Bush to retaliate for the attack on the USS Cole in October 2000, most likely carried out by Osama bin Laden's al Qaeda network. All these displays of weakness emboldened our enemies to commit greater and more outrageous acts of aggression, much as the failure of the West to contest Japan's occupation of Manchuria in the 1930s, or Mussolini's incursion into Abyssinia, encouraged the Axis powers toward more spectacular depravities.

The problem, in short, has not been excessive American assertiveness but rather insufficient assertiveness. The question is whether, having now been attacked, we will act as a great power should.

IT IS STRIKING--and no coincidence--that America now faces the prospect of military action in many of the same lands where generations of British colonial soldiers went on campaigns. Afghanistan, Sudan, Libya, Egypt, Arabia, Mesopotamia (Iraq), Palestine, Persia, the Northwest Frontier (Pakistan)--these are all places where, by the 19th century, ancient imperial authority, whether Ottoman, Mughal, or Safavid, was crumbling, and Western armies had to quell the resulting disorder. In Egypt, in 1882, Lieutenant General Sir Garnet Wolseley put down a nationalist revolt led by a forerunner of Nasser, Colonel Ahmed Arabi. In Sudan, in the 1880s, an early-day bin Laden who called himself the Mahdi (Messiah) rallied the Dervishes for a jihad to spread fundamentalist Islam to neighboring states. Mahdism was crushed by Sir Horatio Herbert Kitchener on the battlefield of Omdurman in 1898. Both Sudan and Egypt remained relatively quiet thereafter, until Britain finally pulled out after World War II.

In Afghanistan, the British suffered a serious setback in 1842 when their forces had to retreat from Kabul and were massacred--all but Dr. William Brydon, who staggered into Jalalabad to tell the terrible tale. This British failure has been much mentioned in recent weeks to support the proposition that the Afghans are invincible fighters. Less remembered is the sequel. An army under Major General George Pollock forced the Khyber Pass, recaptured Kabul, burned down the Great Bazaar to leave "some lasting mark of the just retribution of an outraged nation," and then marched back to India.

Thirty-six years later, in 1878, the British returned to Afghanistan. The highlight of the Second Afghan War was Lieutenant General Frederick Roberts's once-famous march from Kabul to Kandahar. Although the British were always badly outnumbered, they repeatedly bested larger Afghan armies. The British did not try to impose a colonial administration in Kabul, but Afghanistan became in effect a British protectorate with its foreign policy controlled by the raj. This arrangement lasted until the Third Afghan War in 1919, when Britain, bled dry by World War I, finally left the Afghans to their own devices.

Afghanistan and other troubled lands today cry out for the sort of enlightened foreign administration once provided by self-confident Englishmen in jodhpurs and pith

helmets. Is imperialism a dusty relic of a long-gone era? Perhaps. But it's interesting to note that in the 1990s East Timor, Cambodia, Kosovo, and Bosnia all became wards of the international community (Cambodia only temporarily). This precedent could easily be extended, as suggested by David Rieff, into a formal system of United Nations mandates modeled on the mandatory territories sanctioned by the League of Nations in the 1920s. Following the defeat of the German and Ottoman empires, their colonial possessions were handed out to the Allied powers, in theory to prepare their inhabitants for eventual self-rule. (America was offered its own mandate over Armenia, the Dardanelles, and Constantinople, but the Senate rejected it along with the Treaty of Versailles.) This was supposed to be "for the good of the natives," a phrase that once made progressives snort in derision, but may be taken more seriously after the left's conversion (or, rather, reversion) in the 1990s to the cause of "humanitarian" interventions.

The mealy-mouthed modern euphemism is "nation-building," but "state building" is a better description. Building a national consciousness, while hardly impossible (the British turned a collection of princely states into modern India), is a long-term task. Building a working state administration is a more practical short-term objective that has been achieved by countless colonial regimes, including the United States in Haiti (1915-1933), the Dominican Republic (1916-1924), Cuba (1899-1902, 1906-1909), and the Philippines (1899-1935), to say nothing of the achievements of generals Lucius Clay in Germany and Douglas MacArthur in Japan.

Unilateral U.S. rule may no longer be an option today. But the United States can certainly lead an international occupation force under U.N. auspices, with the cooperation of some Muslim nations. This would be a huge improvement in any number of lands that support or shelter terrorists. For the sake of simplicity, let's consider two: Afghanistan and Iraq.

In Afghanistan, as I write, the Special Forces are said to be hunting Osama bin Laden and his followers. Let us hope they do not catch him, at least not alive. It would not be an edifying spectacle to see this scourge of the infidels--this holy warrior who rejects the Enlightenment and all its works--asserting a medley of constitutional rights in a U.S. courtroom, perhaps even in the federal courthouse located just a short walk from where the World Trade Center once stood. But whatever happens with bin Laden, it is clear we cannot leave the Taliban in power. It is a regime that can bring nothing but grief to its people, its neighbors, and the United States.

But when we oust the Taliban, what comes next? Will we repeat our mistake of a decade ago and leave? What if no responsible government immediately emerges? What if millions of Afghans are left starving? Someone would have to step in and help--and don't bet on the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees getting the job done. The United States, in cooperation with its allies, would be left with the responsibility to feed the hungry, tend the sick, and impose the rule of law. This is what we did for the defeated peoples of Germany, Italy, and Japan, and it is a service that we should extend to the oppressed people of Afghanistan as well. Unlike 19th-century European colonialists, we would not aim to impose our rule permanently. Instead, as in Western Germany, Italy, and Japan, occupation would be a temporary expedient to allow the people to get back on their feet until a responsible, humane, preferably democratic, government takes over.

Then there is Iraq. Saddam Hussein is a despised figure whose people rose up in rebellion in 1991 when given the opportunity to do so by American military victories. But the first Bush administration refused to go to Baghdad, and stood by as Saddam crushed the Shiite and Kurdish rebellions. As a shameful moment in U.S. history, the abandonment of these anti-Saddam rebels ranks right up there with our abandonment of the South Vietnamese in 1975. We now have an opportunity to rectify this historic mistake.

The debate about whether Saddam Hussein was implicated in the September 11 attacks misses the point. Who cares if Saddam was involved in this particular barbarity? He has been involved in so many barbarities over the years--from gassing the Kurds to raping the Kuwaitis--that he has already earned himself a death sentence a thousand times over. But it is not just a matter of justice to depose Saddam. It is a matter of self defense: He is currently working to acquire weapons of mass destruction that he or his confederates will unleash against America and our allies if given the chance.

Once Afghanistan has been dealt with, America should turn its attention to Iraq. It will probably not be possible to remove Saddam quickly without a U.S. invasion and occupation--though it will hardly require half a million men, since Saddam's army is much diminished since the Gulf War, and we will probably have plenty of help from Iraqis, once they trust that we intend to finish the job this time. Once we have deposed Saddam, we can impose an American-led, international regency in Baghdad, to go along with the one in Kabul. With American seriousness and credibility thus restored, we will enjoy fruitful cooperation from the region's many opportunists, who will show a newfound eagerness to be helpful in our larger task of rolling up the international terror network that threatens us.

OVER THE YEARS, AMERICA HAS EARNED opprobrium in the Arab world for its realpolitik backing of repressive dictators like Hosni Mubarak and the Saudi royal family. This could be the chance to right the scales, to establish the first Arab democracy, and to show the Arab people that America is as committed to freedom for them as we were for the people of Eastern Europe. To turn Iraq into a beacon of hope for the oppressed peoples of the Middle East: Now that would be a historic war aim.

Is this an ambitious agenda? Without a doubt. Does America have the resources to carry it out? Also without a doubt. Does America have the will? That is an open question. But who, on December 6, 1941, would have expected that in four years' time America would not only roll back German and Japanese aggression, but also occupy Tokyo and Berlin and impose liberal democracy where dictators had long held sway? And fewer American lives were lost on December 7, 1941, than on September 11, 2001.

"With respect to the nature of the regime in Afghanistan, that is not uppermost in our minds right now," Secretary of State Colin Powell recently said. If not uppermost, though, it certainly should be on our minds. Long before British and American armies had returned to the continent of Europe--even before America had entered the struggle against Germany and Japan--Winston Churchill and Franklin Roosevelt met on a battleship in the North Atlantic to plan the shape of the postwar world. The Atlantic Charter of August 14, 1941, pledged Britain and America to creating a liberal world order based on peace and national self-determination. The leaders of America, and of the West, should be making similar plans today.

Once they do, they will see that ambitious goals--such as "regime change"--are also the most realistic. Occupying Iraq and Afghanistan will hardly end the "war on terrorism," but it beats the alternatives. Killing bin Laden is important and necessary; but it is not enough. New bin Ladens could rise up to take his place. We must not only wipe out the vipers but also destroy their nest and do our best to prevent new nests from being built there again.

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