Righteous empire: Imperialism, American-style

by Robert N. Bellah in the March 8, 2003 issue

While “American imperialism” has been a catchphrase on the left for a long time, people on other parts of the political spectrum are only now beginning to accept the idea that we have entered the age of the American Empire. How well is America prepared to sustain an empire? Not very. Indeed, the deep hostility to government that is part of the American tradition makes the very idea of empire repugnant. If we don’t want a strong government at home, why would we want one strong enough to rule the world?

Interestingly enough, George Bush gave clear expression to this feeling during the 2000 electoral campaign. He consistently opposed what he called “nation-building” as an American responsibility and called for more “humility” in our relation to the rest of the world, striking an isolationist chord that has been perennial in our tradition. Many have noted how much 9/11 changed Bush’s views. But even after laying out in September 2002 the most explicit blueprint in history for American world domination in the document “The National Security Strategy of the United States of America,” Bush could tell a group of veterans that America has “no territorial ambitions. We don’t seek an empire. Our nation is committed to freedom for ourselves and for others.”

Such statements led Michael Ignatieff to comment (in a January 5 article in the *New York Times Magazine*

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> A historian once remarked that Britain acquired its empire in “a fit of absence of mind.” If Americans have an empire, they have acquired it in a state of deep denial. But Sept. 11 was an awakening, a moment of reckoning with the extent of American power and the avenging hatreds it arouses. Americans may not have thought of the World Trade Center or

> the Pentagon as the symbolic headquarters of a world empire, but the men with the box cutters certainly did, and so do numberless millions who cheered their terrifying exercise in the propaganda of the deed.

In spite of the fact that with respect to the word “empire” Bush is apparently still in a state of denial, his National Security document is nothing if not a description of empire: America will strike any nation or any group that it deems dangerous, whenever and however it feels necessary, and regardless of provocation or lack thereof. America invites allies to join in these ventures but reserves the right to act with or without allies. No nation will be allowed to surpass or even equal American military power, and indeed other nations are advised to limit or destroy any “weapons of mass destruction” they may have, and that includes Russia, China and India. Only the U.S. will have large reserves of weapons of mass destruction, apparently because only we can be trusted to use them justly.

Although the document several times uses the time-honored phrase “balance of power,” it is very unclear what that phrase can mean in a situation where we have all the power and no one else has anything to balance it with.

So we have a paradox: because of our aversion to the idea of big government, our president can deny the idea that there is an American Empire at the very moment when we are asserting absolute military domination of the globe.

How can we understand this peculiarly American approach to empire? Part of the answer lies in understanding our dissenting Protestant tradition. The dissenting Protestants who founded America were suspicious of government. They thought people should do things for themselves through voluntary societies. They were also deeply moralistic. Opposed to the established churches, which happily included saints and sinners, they regarded their own churches as churches of the saved. They tended to see society and the world as split between the righteous and the unrighteous. In that tradition, the desire to triumph over evil can trump the aversion to power. If evil is loose in the world, it is up to us to put a stop to it.

Since 9/11 Bush’s rhetoric has been continuously punctuated by the words “evil” and “evildoer.” Perhaps the most extreme use of the term came in the service in the National Cathedral on September 14, 2001, in which Bush declared that it is “our responsibility to history” to “rid the world of evil.”

Robert Jewett has long pointed out the American infatuation with superhero figures with mythic powers whose sole purpose is to rid the world of evil, though they never seem to succeed completely. The superhero is usually fighting against an evil genius bent on world domination who must be stopped. Enter Osama bin Laden. Early on Bush promised to “smoke him out and get him.” That hasn’t worked out, but there is always a waiting line of potential evil geniuses, and the next in line turned out to be Saddam Hussein. Yasir Arafat is also in line, as is Kim Jong Il. If there are evil people out there who want to destroy us—and we must admit that Osama bin Laden, at least, has explicitly promised that that is exactly what he wants to do—then any use of force to put a stop to them is justified.

Splitting the world into good and evil is a general human propensity; I don’t want to claim that the U.S. has a monopoly on this activity, only that we do it more than other Western nations. And even though I see dissenting Protestantism as one source of this tendency, as my reference to superheroes suggests, this tendency is now secularized and pervasive in our popular culture, disseminated by movies, television and video games. At a deeper level, our infatuation with technology plays into this idea: technology, particularly military technology, will give us the equivalent of the supernatural invincibility of superheroes.

In describing the moral shift after 9/11 Joan Didion in her article “Fixed Ideas” (*New York Review of Books*, January 16) quotes Steven Weber of the Institute of International Studies:

> The first thing you noticed [after 9/11] was in the bookstores. On September 12, the shelves were emptied of books on Islam, on American foreign policy, on Iraq, on Afghanistan. There was a substantive discussion about what it is about the nature of the American presence in the world that created a situation in which movements like al-Qaeda can thrive and prosper. I thought that was a very promising sign.

But that discussion got short-circuited. Sometime in late October, early November 2001, the tone of that discussion switched, and it became: What’s wrong with the Islamic world that it failed to produce democracy, science, education and its own enlightenment, and instead created societies that breed terror?

I have my own memory of when the discussion shifted: the Fox network began an incessant campaign against those seeking to “understand” those who had attacked

us. According to the Fox commentators, pure evil is beyond understanding—it can only be opposed. “Moral clarity” became the watchword: any effort to understand the enemy, above all any attempt to show that the U.S. might bear some responsibility for conditions leading up to the attacks, was denounced as showing a lack of moral clarity, as moral relativism, postmodernism or worse.

Didion’s point is that this tendency has flattened discussion since 9/11, and has created a government in which Democrats, with few exceptions, either have remained silent or have supported whatever the president wants with respect to foreign policy—the congressional vote on war powers in regard to Iraq being the prime example.

An understanding of moral splitting helps us see how a nation deeply suspicious of government seems ready to assert absolute world military supremacy—after all, we are simply trying to go after the bad guys—and to doubt the patriotism of anyone who thinks otherwise. But does moral splitting help us assume the responsibility that world power carries with it?

Ignatieff argues strongly that it does not. In an earlier article in the *New York Times Magazine* (July 28, 2002) titled “Nation-Building Lite,” he notes that “the Bush administration is trying to reconstruct Afghanistan on the cheap. But empires come heavy or not at all.” Remember Afghanistan? Apparently neither our leaders nor our fellow citizens really want to. Ignatieff helps us understand why:

> Empire means big government. One paradox of the new American empire is that it is being constructed by a Republican administration that hates big government. Its way around this contradiction is to get its allies to shoulder the burdens it won’t take on itself. In the new imperial division of labor on display in Afghanistan, the Americans do most of the fighting while the Europeans, who have no ideological problems with big government but don’t like fighting, are only too happy to take on the soft sides of nation-building: roads, schools, sanitation and water.

As Ignatieff observes, the U.S. is supplying only military security lite as well. It’s cheaper for the U.S. military to work with local warlords than to help Muhammad Karzai build a military force that could control the whole country. But local warlords are prone to fight each other and to resist centralized control from Kabul. Since the U.S. is unwilling to provide even minimal security for the whole country, the various

European nations that have taken on nation-building responsibilities are more and more uncertain whether they can even stay in Afghanistan. From the American point of view, we have taken care of the bad guys: the Taliban are no longer in power. Why can't we just leave, like superheroes always do after they have defeated the evil genius? Is our grasp on history so faint that we have forgotten the last time we intervened in Afghanistan to support the Mujaheddin in their war against the Soviets and then left when we thought the battle was won? Ignatieff writes:

> Washington had better decide what it wants. If it won't sustain and increase its military presence here, the other internationals will start heading for the exit. If that occurs, there is little to stop Afghanistan from becoming, once again, the terror and heroin capital of the world. There is no reason that this has to happen. Afghans themselves know they have only one more chance. They understand the difficult truth that their best hope of freedom lies in a temporary experience of imperial rule.

Afghanistan remains exhibit A for the problems of empire, American style. We are prepared to fight the bad guys wherever they appear, but we don't seem to have the stomach to finish the job after the initial military victory. If we are messing up in Afghanistan, where reconstruction and serious reform are stalling, why would one think we would do better in Iraq, a much larger and more complex society? But Afghanistan is old news. We barely hear a whisper about it from Washington.

Ignatieff's more recent, even more sobering *Times* article is titled simply "The Burden." For the British in their heyday empire was the "white man's burden"—thank God we have gotten beyond that. Nevertheless, it's true that empires create burdens.

I should make it clear that I don't think—and Ignatieff doesn't think—that empires are inevitably bad. In *War Before Civilization*, Lawrence Keeley argues that the Roman Empire created one of the most peaceful periods in history—fewer men under arms, and fewer civilians killed in war than in most of history. The British Empire during its heyday, roughly from the Napoleonic Wars to World War I, maintained a degree of tranquillity in the world that encouraged unprecedented economic growth. However, the Romans and the British knew that empire imposes enormous burdens and were prepared historically and culturally to take those burdens on. At their best they also knew that no empire, no matter how strong, is

all-powerful. Overextension is the bane of empires: limits must be recognized. If they are not, it is the beginning of the end: burdens that are too heavy lead to imperial defeat and dissolution.

Ignatieff argues, and I agree with him, that the world needs the American Empire as a guarantor of security and the basis for building new institutions in shattered nations. But military superiority is only the first step in creating a successful empire. Are we prepared for the many time-consuming and exhaustingly expensive steps that must follow if the empire is to be a success?

What are our cultural resources for sustaining empire? I've suggested that dissenting Protestantism is an unlikely support for imperial power. Furthermore, dissenting Protestantism is not at its most influential today. It has been undermined by the very individualism it helped to unleash. Max Weber argued almost 100 years ago that Protestantism, in helping to create capitalism, was unleashing a genie that would come back to haunt it. Capitalism gives rise to a secular version of Protestantism that operates through the culture of mass consumerism and the ideology of privatized self-fulfillment. Consumerism and privatization undermine the very institutional basis of democracy—that is, the structure of voluntary association, the civil society, without which democracy becomes, as Tocqueville warned, democratic despotism or the rule of an economic aristocracy. It is a strange time for America to take on the responsibilities of empire—a time when our own society, from the family to the corporation, shows signs of deep inner incoherence.

We must also ask what kind of influence America is exerting on the rest of the world. Every great empire depends as much on its cultural influence as on its political authority and military might. American culture, through the movies, television and the Internet, pervades the world, but with what message? The idea of affluence and self-indulgence as the meaning of life would not seem to be a firm basis for the dissemination of democracy. To what extent is our culture teaching the world the virtues of citizenship, self-control, care of others? These are the ideals that make democracy work. To what extent is American culture teaching the world the opposite of these ideals?

American intellectuals may be tempted to watch in resigned fascination as the greatest empire the world has ever seen lumbers toward self-destruction. I don't want to do that. I still believe our enormous power can be used for good. Even though, as a Christian, I can only support military action with fear and trembling, I

am not arguing that all use of military power is wrong. In a world as dangerous as ours, a judicious use of military power is probably unavoidable. I did not oppose the war in the Persian Gulf: annexation by force must be reversed. I believe it was a great mistake to leave Saddam in power in 1991—removing him would have meant simply finishing a war he had provoked. Our intervention in Bosnia was wrong only in that it came much too late, after a quarter of a million unnecessary deaths had occurred. I believe it was right to stop the ethnic cleansing of Kosovo, though as in Afghanistan, where I also think our military action was justified, we can ask if our contribution to its rebuilding has matched our military victory.

But military action should always be a last resort. Its consequences are too grave and its outcome too uncertain to engage in except as a last resort. At the moment, I would much rather see the U.S. military intervene in Israel and Palestine to provide security for both peoples and the possibility of building a democratic and peaceful Palestinian state than engage in a highly personalized invasion of an “evil” country yet to be proven a threat to anyone. Fortunately, the supermen at the Pentagon do not seem inclined to take on the really dangerous member of the axis of evil, North Korea—at least not for now.

As for cultural resources, I have several suggestions for making our empire benign, though some of them may seem utopian. We are, more than ever, a city on a hill. But what do the eyes of all people see when they look at us? Are we the model of Christian charity that John Winthrop and the 17th-century Puritans intended us to be? Not nearly as good a model as we could be. Why do we have the highest rate of poverty, the largest percentage of the population without health insurance, and the greatest number of gun deaths among any of the advanced industrial nations? Why are we polarized into two nations, one living in First World affluence, the other in Third World misery, again unlike any other advanced nation? If we want to be, as other successful empires have been, a teacher to the world, why cannot we give them a better model to imitate? Empire is enormously expensive. If it means that we abandon those in need at home, is it worth the candle?

Those who are dissenting Protestants—and more people than we know are influenced by this tradition—should consider whether their aversion to government and their tendency to moralistic splitting are an adequate basis for imperial responsibility. On this point, Jimmy Carter provides a helpful model. As a professing Baptist, though one who has found it necessary to dissociate himself from the Southern Baptist Convention in its present incarnation, he exemplifies the dissenting

tradition. Yet he has turned the individualistic moralism that somewhat marred his presidency into a model of civic responsibility in his years of retirement, becoming perhaps the most valued ex-president in our history and a deserving recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize.

Influential though the dissenting Protestant tradition is, it is clearly only one of many religious traditions in today's America. Traditions with a stronger sense of the common good, a better understanding that we need each other and will not make it all alone—in one way Judaism, in another Catholicism, even Protestant denominations with a heritage of establishment—have much to contribute as we think through how we as a nation must act in the world today. I also think all the minority traditions—Muslim, Buddhist, Native American and others—have much from which we can learn. Almost all of them, in one way or another, have ways of thinking about the world that are less individualistic and privatizing than our dominant tradition.

Our greatest need, in our hour of imperial eminence, is moderation. Our greatest danger, in our present moralistic and belligerent mood, is taking on responsibilities we cannot and will not fulfill. Though we are the greatest military power the world has ever seen, we cannot rule the world alone, not even if we have Britain as our faithful shepherd dog ally. We are not rich enough or strong enough to do that. In the past six months we have to some degree pulled back from a radical unilateralism to a recognition that the rest of the world counts. Let us nurture that change and extend it.

Edward Tiryakian, in an interesting paper on American hegemony after September 11, argues that we cannot succeed as the world's only hegemonic power. He suggests that a viable world order cannot be unipolar, but must be at least tripolar: the European Union and the major nations of East Asia must be equal partners in sharing the burden of lessening world disorder.

It is not helpful, though it might be understandable, for our president to say not long after 9/11, "You're either with us or you're with the terrorists." The world is too complex and its diversity too great to be split into two camps on any issue. We must expect that many who have no sympathy with terrorism nonetheless are not "with us" in all that we propose to do. When we tell them what to do it would be wise, as Tony Blair recently suggested, to "listen back," even if we have to hear strong disagreements.

We should also remember that, though unilateralism—we will either withdraw from the world or dominate it—has long existed in the American tradition, it has never been the only strand. It was, after all, Woodrow Wilson, a Presbyterian, who proposed the League of Nations at the end of World War I, and Franklin Delano Roosevelt, an Episcopalian, who drew the plans for the United Nations as World War II neared its conclusion. If at the moment the American administration seems inclined to withdraw from or refuse to join almost every international agreement (the Kyoto Protocol and the International Court of Justice are only the most obvious examples), this has not always been true. We have in the past signed test ban treaties, promoted efforts to limit nuclear proliferation, joined with other nations in a variety of international undertakings. Our support for rebuilding Europe and Japan after World War II, though in part motivated by the cold war, was sustained and successful, the opposite of the pattern of hit and run we are tempted by today.

The National Security document of September 2002 claims world military hegemony. As Max Weber has taught us, the monopoly on the use of force is the very definition of the state. That document is a blueprint for a world state, and that state is us. The new world order indeed. But can a nation that hates taxes become the world state?

A nation that is in many ways falling apart at home can’t be the only player on the world stage. We need to build a society—and a world—in which it will be clear that we need one another, that we will bear one another’s burdens. As John Winthrop said in his great sermon before disembarking for the New World:

> We must delight in each other, make others’ conditions our own, rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together, always having before our eyes our commission and community in the work, our community as members of the same body . . .

The U.S. has enormous power, more than any nation has ever had before—probably more than it is good for any nation to have. Power in itself is not bad. The question is, What kind of power? Careful power is moderate and restrained, always thoughtful of consequences, always concerned that it nurture, not destroy. The Christian tradition is rooted in the idea that God in Christ is the very exemplum of careful power. All of the other great traditions say something similar in one way or another. Can we build an empire based on careful power and lay regardless power aside? That is the test that 9/11 and its aftermath lays on our shoulders.