Imperial power: Can an empire commit itself to justice?

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"In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree . . .” With those words the writer of Luke’s Gospel acknowledged the political backdrop of Jesus’ life. The Roman Empire was the world’s unrivaled superpower. Its influence extended throughout the Mediterranean, and it had developed the capacity to enforce its will in such remote outposts as Judea. The imperial power figured into Jesus’ birth even as it presided at his death.

The unrivaled power that shapes the globe for those who would follow Jesus two millennia later is the U.S. Its culture is inescapable, its economic interests range from polar slopes to subequatorial forests to central Asian deserts, and its military might is unprecedented. While U.S. citizens may prefer not to think of their country in terms of empire, they must face up to their nation’s immense power if only to consider how to use it. Given its vast but not unlimited global power, what kind of international system should America seek to foster?

Throughout the cold war, the U.S. pursued a foreign policy governed principally by the consensus that communism should be contained. When the bipolar world of American and Soviet power collapsed, so did this longstanding policy. The U.S. emerged as the world’s sole superpower precisely when a domestic consensus about its international role was dissolving.

For the moment the war on terrorism is forming an overarching foreign-policy objective. But if terrorism is to be defeated, the U.S. must quickly embrace broader global goals. And these goals must be defined by something more than the quest for wealth—developing markets, securing resources, and in general making the world safe for corporations to do business. It is precisely the unconstrained pursuit of those objectives that has alienated even comfortable citizens in the European Union, not to speak of impoverished people everywhere.

Nor is it sufficient to attempt to establish a new fortress America, secure beneath an antiballistic missile shield from which it can emerge to address international affairs when compelled to do so. If isolation were ever desirable, it is now impossible. The U.S.'s security and prosperity are embedded within the global system it has been so instrumental in creating. The U.S. can either seek to dominate that system—the way of empire—or it can seek to foster respect, equity and justice—the way of interdependent diplomacy.

It is in the long-term self-interest of the U.S. to abjure empire in favor of a global system in which its own power is significantly tempered by institutions such as the United Nations and the World Court; by regional alliances in which it may not participate; by the emerging global recognition of human rights (even Afghan warlords realize they should appear to be interested in human rights); and by the development of international law. It is also in its interest to pursue a global agenda that urgently addresses north-south economic inequity, environmental degradation and catastrophic medical crises such as the AIDS epidemic in Africa.

This is not an idealistic internationalist agenda. It is one that most realistically promises to realize the ancient and urgent hope for peace on earth.