The Inner Lives of the Conquerors

written by Sam Kradel | July 3, 2011

THE UNITED STATES' STATUS as some form of imperial power is scarcely disputed on the Left. Richard Immerman's *Empire for Liberty: A History of America from Benjamin Franklin to Paul Wolfowitz* is not a book written particularly for or from the Left, yet in some respects it goes further in defense of this idea than many leftists have allowed.

For Immerman, the United States not only *is* an empire, but *has always been* one, from its foundation exercising "effective control" over one or another peripheral population "in such a way that it molds the population's politics." The American empire has rarely set forth its purpose as barefaced domination. Instead, Immerman argues, it has propped itself up rhetorically and ideologically by "inextricably" linking itself "to establishing and promoting liberty in the contemporary context."

Both the means by which American power has been asserted and the conceptions of liberty that have been used to justify it have varied considerably. Immerman therefore seeks to trace their evolution, collective biography serving as his tool. Each of six chapters examines the life and career of a pivotal figure in the development of U.S. foreign policy, their collective life spans encompassing the country's whole history. "[T]he likelihood that America would grow in size and power was great from the start," he writes. "Because certain individuals made choices, nevertheless, it grew in a certain manner and with certain consequences."

IMMERMAN ANTICIPATES, probably correctly, that readers will "quarrel with the selection" of individuals included in his book. They are, however, well suited to his purposes, each having occupied positions which compelled them to articulate fairly weighty schemes concerning American dominance at various stages of its growth and consolidation.

The first such stage that can be discerned in Immerman's account is that of territorial expansion, examined in chapters on Benjamin Franklin and John Quincy Adams. Both men thought it destiny that the young nation should embrace all of North America. But while Franklin, however much he talked about liberty, "was more concerned with power and relationships among the powerful," Adams valued what Immerman calls "political liberties that transcended vocational and even financial interests." Immerman sees this latter sentiment as having animated Adams' eventual turn against expansion.

The period of extraterritorial expansion is typified by William Seward and Henry Cabot Lodge. Immerman shows that Seward, while genuinely repulsed by slavery, positively identified liberty with trade, quickly moving after the Slave Power's defeat to lay the groundwork for the United States' commercial supremacy. Lodge defended imperialism — he embraced the label, then gaining currency (not least among socialists) — essentially in terms of its modernizing influence, a view occasionally in tension with the biological racism to which he vocally adhered.

Finally, Immerman moves on to the exponents of American superpowerdom, John Foster Dulles and Paul Wolfowitz. Dulles "did not concern himself with the liberty of those subject to U.S. rules." Rather, "the absence of liberty in the Soviet empire was what mattered," justifying all the intrigues he and his brother could imagine. Immerman paints Wolfowitz as an incorrigible idealist, his belief that the U.S. should "spread the American dream by exporting democracy" undeterred by the doubts

of peers, or indeed by any evidence suggesting the contrary.

Empire for Liberty's major strength is its account of diplomatic history, the author's specialty. Immerman's blow-by-blow depictions of Franklin's postwar negotiations with France and Adams' maneuvers to acquire Florida are especially compelling, providing keen insights into the talents and personal fixations of each as much as the political forces at work. It must be noted, though, that this strength shows somewhat in spite of Immerman's style, which is at times dry and often repetitive.

THE APPROACH OF COLLECTIVE BIOGRAPHY might give rise to the temptation to dismiss *Empire for Liberty* as promulgating some Great Man Theory of American empire. Yet this would be unfair: "The individuals on whom this books focuses were (or are) exceptional in who they were and what they achieved," states Immerman. "But they were not unique. They represent attitudes toward, and visions of, the empire that were grounded in a specific time and environment."

At points, he does an admirable job of laying these attitudes bare. He demonstrates clearly, for example, that none of the first four figures examined, despite their various differences, embraced anything approaching racial egalitarianism. Likewise, by way of Wolfowitz, he is able to subtly illustrate American neoconservatism's peculiar reading of the Shoah as a pro-American fable.

Yet Immerman also writes that "when one sifts through the multiple influences that are the stuff of history, one ends up with individuals who choose to do one thing and not another." Here his justification becomes problematic. The kinds of happenings that *Empire for Liberty* seeks to document, whether running an electoral campaign, publishing a manifesto, or starting a war, are not the acts of individuals as such, but of acts of parties, think tanks, faculties, social clubs and states, and of individuals taking part in them. Individual choice thus becomes relevant chiefly as the means by which the individual identifies with and organize one's activity through social institutions. If the latter are treated as mere "influences," as scenery to be set aside, their integral character is obscured.

Perhaps due to this blind spot, the book suffers from some puzzling omissions. The chapter on Adams makes much, as it should, of his break with Federalist opposition to the Louisiana Purchase. But it includes nothing on the role concerns about slavery's expansion played in that opposition, or how Adams justified downplaying them, quite in distinction to his later attitudes. Along the same lines, though Lodge's biography focuses extensively on the Spanish-American War, it contains no mention of the depression that preceded the war. Lodge's resentment against the "bankers and capitalists" opposed to his designs is noted, presenting an opportunity to explore the conflict between fractions of capital in transition to a new phase of development. But the author misses his chance.

Questions of proper emphasis and interpretation naturally arise, most obviously the case of Wolfowitz, whose carefully cultivated reputation as an exponent of civil and political rights is given too much credence by Immerman. For example, he portrays Wolfowitz as a longtime skeptic of the Kirkpatrick Doctrine, with its infamous distinction between "totalitarian" (Communist) and favored "authoritarian" (anticommunist) regimes, a doctrine that simply became "progressively more outspoken," particularly after the fall of Marcos in Indonesia. But as James Mann documents in his incisive *Rise of the Vulcans*, Wolfowitz actually continued to defend Kirkpatrick's ideas many years later. Their eventual (unacknowledged) abandonment in Indonesia is more easily explained as a concession granted in light of an altered balance of forces.

Empire for Liberty does succeed on its own terms. These portraits, however partial, leave no

doubt that the American state has always sought to rule non-Americans, and that this rule has always been portrayed by its advocates, whether wholly sincerely or not, as a means of defending or extending one or another form of liberty. And Immerman performs a valuable service in casting a critical light on these "juxtapositions" (a term to which he frequently returns), providing some view of the inconsistencies, hypocrisies, and tragedies (many would say atrocities) latent in each.

Still, a more powerful case could be made. Immerman is chiefly concerned to show discontinuities — between territorial or extraterritorial expansion, and between concepts of liberty so diverse that "about the only things Americans agree on is that it is good." But continuities also deserve recognition. And certainly, it is a constant that any aspiring empire-builder must build in broad accord with the needs of those who own, resource, or control the institutions through which he acts.

Armed with such an approach, the structural and ideological flux of empire is more readily explained. The shared land hunger of the planters and small farmers created a bloc for territorial conquest that Northern capitalists were long unable to resist. And to smooth over the contradictions in this bloc, planters from Jefferson onward were keen to emphasize a shared interest in the liberty to work the land. When this alliance was finally fractured, the emboldened bourgeoisie strove to keep up with its competitors abroad. Because so many of these competitors' colonial holdings were unequivocally territorial, it was possible to present their snatching away as their liberation. And because this newly assertive class soon encountered its own opposition — revealed particularly in the Pullman Strike of 1894 — it had every interest in doing so.

Immerman does not altogether ignore class. There are passing references, for instance, to Franklin's "sympathy with Jefferson's agrarian ideal" and to Dulles' career as a corporate lawyer. But it is absent as a focal point, lending his view of the past an impressionistic coloration.