

The Failure of American Empire Lite

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The September 11th attacks were the first major event I can remember. I was in Grade Eight at the time. We were all sent home where the news played scenes of the carnage over and over again like some kind of Sadean merry-go-round. Even in Canada there was panic that we might be next, with the center of Ottawa locked down and our leaders struggling to one up each other in expressions of remorse and stern concern.

Mere weeks later the Bush administration, backed by a tremendous groundswell in global and domestic good will, launched an invasion of Afghanistan to oust the Taliban and capture Osama Bin Laden. The former was seemingly accomplished in record time, the latter would take many more years. It seemed like victory had been won at minimal cost and maximal moral integrity. Little did we know the writing had already plastered the wall as early as September 20th, when Bush emphatically dualized the world into those who were with “us” and those who were “with the terrorists.” The implications would soon become clear: this would be a very different kind of conflict, one which transcended global borders and was directed against a spectral and indeterminate series of enemies, whose number would increase as resentment at American interventionism cascaded into violence. Less than two years later, the administration lied its way into an illegal war against Iraq that massaged the egos of those who’d wanted Saddam Hussein dead since 1991. But a series of arrogant blunders — most notably effectively dissolving previous power structures wholesale and beginning wholesale — led to a long insurgency and the collapse of the entire region in the face of the Syrian Civil War and ISIS aggression after 2011. Now, a decade on, the final domino has toppled and the Taliban have regained control of Afghanistan.

The Conceits of Empire Lite

One of the most remarkable features of the war was how decisively it broke with many of the hallowed pieties of American self-reverence. Conservative Republicans, who some might have expected to have at least some respect for traditional practices, became entranced by an unholy neoconservative Jacobinism, one which adopted an almost Year One type approach to the countries they sought to govern. What was fascinating about this was how reflective this Millenarian approach to reality was. In a 2004 interview in the *New York Times* a senior Bush official, widely alleged to be Karl Rove, infamously disdained the “reality based community,” claiming that as an empire “we create our own reality.” What this reflected was all the old Thucydidean warning about hubris in

politics coupled with the natal post-modernism of the American conservative movement. The belief that the world was a plastic medium defined by the brightly colored ideological fantasies of its participants, who jostled with one another for the power to will theirs into solidity over and against the materiality of living people and their centuries-old social and material relations. But underneath this bluster was a deep anxiety that the failure to achieve this almost Miltonian power of imperial creation would lead to the decadence and fall of the shining city on the hill. Organizations like the *Project for a New American Century* expressed anxiety that the end of the Cold War would lead Americans to lose their martial edge, and sink into a mire of “complacency,” consumerism, and lethargy rather than the spectacular projection of power as an instrument of hegemonic global rule. As William Kristol and Robert Kagan, two of the leading intellectuals of the movement put it:

“American civilians at home, preoccupied with the distribution of tax breaks and government benefits, will not come to [the military’s] support when the going gets tough. Weak political leadership and a poor job educating the citizenry to the responsibilities of global hegemony have created an increasingly distinct and alien military culture. Ask any mechanic or mess boy on an aircraft carrier why he is patrolling the seas, and he can give a more sophisticated explanation of power projection than 99 per cent of college graduates.”

What was of course required was reinvigorated military spending, and a more ambitious foreign policy agenda to export the universality of the American way to countries where it eminently belonged. They simply didn’t know it yet. But more than that was the importance of the image of power as a precondition for its reality; the projection of macho force and military might were the key to maintaining the awe required for hegemony as much as its actual use. More hardened social conservatives like Dinesh D’Souza ruminated that in fact it was the American left that had helped bring about 9/11, by attracting the ire of Islamic fundamentalists with their permissive sinfulness. The common thread unifying this dialectical dance between imperial hubris and fear of decay was the fatal conceit that power and discipline make the world, and a country where the disorder of faithlessness and individual dissent were overcome would be the most powerful and disciplined of all. If it failed at this the country would inevitably be swallowed by enemies, who held fast where their rivals faltered.

None of these tendencies were unique in American history of course. Everything from the euphoric imperial universalism to the paranoid style of politics had its precedents. One of the most ironic examples of this was the intensely politically correct language that surrounded the neoconservative War on Terror. This was sometimes misdescribed as Orwellian, in its seeming relish in putting opposites together. The infamous *Patriot Act* intended to defend American freedoms invited the government to spy on its citizens. Bringing “independence” to the people of Afghanistan and Iraq meant liberating their industries from national control and allowing the entry of American capital. But Orwellian language requires a willful weaponization of untruth against truth, mobilized by the heads an authoritarian party that is self-reflective about its own hypocrisy. The lower downs may have to engage in double think, but not the party heads. What was distinctive about the lingo of the War on Terror was how desperately its proponents tried to hold the self-imploding ideological contradictions together, even in the face of mounting criticism and catastrophe, through sheer willpower. What was distinctive was the way their imperial, authoritarian, and militaristic sensibilities were almost automatically disowned by their proponents, almost like ritualistic Catholic confessionals through which these sinful inclinations were disavowed and the national conscience cleansed. Which of course allows us to sin again with a pure heart.

Nowhere were these tendencies better reflected than in the kitschy neologism “Empire Lite.” Coined by Michael Ignatieff in the mid-2000s, empire lite referred to the increasingly informal ways American hegemony manifested across the globe. Everything from its global alliance system with other developed states — from Canada to the United Kingdom — to its network of laws and soft-

power projection, enabled the United States to maintain a relatively benign order without the requirement of military occupation which defined what I suppose were the “heavy” empires of yore. Of course sometimes the United States did intervene militarily, with the most remarkable examples being the twin invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan. And Ignatieff even argued that in defense of “empire lite” lesser evils like modest forms of torture –also whitewashed under the politically-correct guise of “enhanced interrogation” — would be justifiable. But what was significant was that in these instances violence was of a more pure and holy form, since it was motivated less by avarice, than by a humanitarian desire to spread human rights and liberal democracy to authoritarian countries. Freedom from cruel and unusual punishment for all, brought to you courtesy of waterboarding in Guantanamo Bay.

Fat Free, Sugar Free Empire

The Obama administration’s efforts to rebrand the war in a more humanitarian fashion, if anything, doubled down on this attempt to have what Slavoj Žižek might call a fat free, sugar free empire, one where acceptable human casualties — read, American military casualties –would be kept to a minimum, but imperial power and prestige would be maintained. For a brief period there was an effort to emulate the Iraq “surge” through deploying tens of thousands of additional troops, leading to a peak in the early 2010s where there were 100,000 soldiers in the country. Obama’s administration even succeeded where its predecessor had failed, and Osama Bin Laden was assassinated and 9/11 avenged in 2011. But as it became clear that the Iraq war was ending and the public’s appetite for conflict continued to wane, troop numbers fell dramatically. This of course meant that the war would increasingly be subcontracted out to a combination of drones, militias, and dubious allies. Many of these would cause irreparable damage to the region; but still better than the irreparable damage to public opinion of the war that would result from more American military deaths. Obama’s lethal record of drone strikes even solicited criticism from typically friendly media outlets like *The Atlantic* (though of course that didn’t stop Trump from later carrying on the same policy with even less transparency and even more callousness). Throughout Obama tried to sell the conflict as an unwanted burden, brought about by the 9/11 attacks and in need of a swift end. And undoubtedly there is more validity to this claim than the argument the United States had any business in Iraq. But the reality was that the United States did invade a foreign country, topple its government, and install a weak puppet regime in its place. In doing so it assumed responsibility for the care of the Afghan people and their security; a responsibility that was often treated as an even more unwelcome burden than the war itself.

The Trump administration transformed this policy of wounded aloofness into a veritable political style. Trump himself lied about his initial support for the War on Terror, trying to paint himself as a visionary Cassandra who saw the disaster to come rather than a huckster fellow traveler who abandoned ship when convenient. Superficially, Trumpist post-modern conservatism’s “America First” policy seemed to constitute a retreat from neoconservative imperialism abroad. And to the extent it perpetuated the Obama era yearning to purge itself of responsibility for the country’s chosen wars, there is some truth to that. Trump followed Obama’s policy of briefly increasing US troop numbers, before bringing them dramatically down while ramping up ineffective but violent drone attacks. He even intended a June 2021 withdrawal from Afghanistan, signing Faustian deals with the Taliban that turned out not to be worth the paper they were printed on. Historians will no doubt debate whether Trump would have made an even bigger muck of the retreat than Biden; and like all hypotheticals we will never know for sure. His ego may have demanded a show of splendor and force to preserve American pride, but on the other hand the Trumpists were never known for their ability to organize more or less anything effectively.

The real legacy of Trumpist foreign policy, including in Afghanistan, will be the impact on conservative discourse going forward. Trumpism assimilated many of the post-modern features of

neoconservative empire lite, but instead directed them internally against enemies at home. Instead of a titanic clash of civilizations which would provide the necessary tonic against American decadence, its energies were largely spent in culture wars and solidifying the most anti-democratic and revanchist features of the constitutional order. In its indifference to reality at home, and its veneration of power as the medium through which the facts of the world could be overcome, we see in Trumpism the worrying extension of an imperial logic developed abroad applied erratically on the home front. A logic defined by the continuous embrace and then disavowal of its own contradictions. Embrace where that allowed Trump to posture as a man of power and strength, who wouldn't allow something as inconvenient as truth or facticity get in the way of "winning." Disavowal where a majority of the American people rejected their tin-pot leader in November 2020, leading to the unreal spectacle of the Republican party racing to erode democracy while claiming to defend it. In all of this the Afghan people were, predictably, forgotten.

The only thing "lite" about American empire turned out to be a dogged unwillingness to accept any culpability in using power to try and remake the world, instead insisting that the exercise of violence could be innocent as long as the right people were doing it. As it became increasingly clear what would really be required to remodel the globe into a true McWorld, the razor of integrity cut deep into the contradictions of American imperialism. Moreover it also became clear that despite the Crusader-like faith in imperial power to "create our own reality" it turned out reality is quite real. The mounting cost of empire lite, almost always framed in terms of consequences for America and its allies rather than those subjected to their benevolent interventions, left us with a serious choice. Accept that if you break it, you bought it. This would mean acknowledging that the invasions were wrong and strategically misguided, recognizing that it would now take decades and a lot more pain to actually bring about the effective, rights respecting democratic government that was supposed to simply blossom in bombed out soil. Or blame the country and its puppet leaders for not respecting the gift delivered unto them and leave them to their fate. In 2011 that's what happened in Iraq. Now in 2021 it's the turn of the Afghan people.

This turn of the screw will undoubtedly shape geopolitics for many years. America's international reputation, already seriously compromised by the outrage over the war in Iraq, will take another serious hit. In the 2010s this enabled Russia and China to regionally flex into the Ukraine and many parts of Asia and sub-Saharan Africa respectively. They will no doubt feel further emboldened. The prestige of the Taliban will likely be immeasurably increased, leading many fundamentalists and militants to regard them as an inspiration. While making some half-hearted efforts at rebranding themselves as cuddlier, gentler authoritarian fundamentalists the tragic reality is that many people will suffer from their revenge and reprisals. We should brush aside the inevitable, Islamophobic anxieties about immigration and accept as many refugees as possible, though the window will likely get narrower by the day. And most importantly we should recommit ourselves to empowering an international legal system to put normative pressure on states that wish to launch ill-conceived and self-serving wars, even when backed up by flowery rhetoric. This might not have stopped the war in Afghanistan, which received widespread support, but it could have prevented the parallel disaster in Iraq. This should be coupled with more stringent deterrent measures which threaten the officials of powerful states with criminal sanctions in the event that they advocate for unjust wars, or choose to use unjust and cruel means to fight them. The War on Terror brought a lot of evil and suffering into the world. Nothing can make that right, but we can try for once to learn from the past and realize that the answer to terror can't be the banal horrors of empire.