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A Critic at Large

# Power Rangers

Did the Bush Administration create a new American empire—or weaken the old one?

by Joshua Micah Marshall

Last March, after Jacques Chirac, the French President, announced that he would veto any new United Nations resolution sanctioning war against Iraq, the White House saw a chance for a different sort of victory. If a majority of the fifteen Security Council members voted for a new resolution and France vetoed it, the United States could claim that the problem was not American unilateralism but French obstructionism. And that hope set the United States scrambling to line up the votes of Chile, Mexico, Pakistan, and a trio of impoverished states from the west coast of Africa. "No matter what the whip count is, we're calling for the vote," President Bush said at a news conference broadcast worldwide on March 6th. "It's time for people to show their cards, let the world know where they stand when it comes to Saddam."

But, apart from Britain, Spain, and Bulgaria, the countries on the Security Council declined to side with the United States. Emissaries threatened and cajoled, to no avail. Pakistan, admittedly, had a restive Muslim population to contend with. But Mexico and Chile said no, too, and so did Cameroon and Guinea and Angola, a country that is heavily dependent on American trade and good will. In the end, Bush didn't call for a vote.

At the time, this moment of mortification received scant attention; the outbreak of war was imminent. It was a curious spectacle, though. No country in the world could stand in the way of America's determination to remove Saddam. But the United States seemed powerless to persuade even the smallest nations to legitimatize its power with a symbolic vote.

As hard-liners in the Bush Administration saw it, the real humiliation was that we had sought the approval of a quarrelsome international body in the first place. During the previous year, a growing number of them had become fascinated with the notion of empire. It was time for America, unabashedly and unilaterally, to assert its supremacy and to maintain global order. The U.N. debacle—the mismatch between our diplomatic sway and our military might—could be taken as confirmation of this view. And yet, if our overtures carried so little weight, just what was the nature of our imperial power?

For leftist critics of America's role in the world, it has long been a baleful article of faith that the United States is an agent of "neo-imperialism," exerting its power through global capital and through organizations like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. After September 11th, a left-wing accusation became a right-wing aspiration: conservatives increasingly began to espouse a world view that was unapologetically imperialist. You could watch this happening in Washington's think tanks. Over their lunchroom tables, in their seminar rooms, on the covers of their small magazines, the idea of empire got a thorough airing—particularly among ideologues close to the policymakers planning the war on terror. At a panel discussion in the middle of 2002, I first heard "Middle East reform"—as in making the Middle East democratic and bourgeois—spoken of the way people speak of welfare reform. As the military historian Max Boot wrote in *The Weekly Standard*, "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."

Everyone could admit that there were disreputable aspects of the old empire. Yet what would be wrong with a truly enlightened version of foreign rule? "There's general

agreement that there was a mistake that the Brits made, which is that they allowed the imperial administrators to perpetuate a kind of snobbishness over the Western-oriented gentlemen," one of these conservative thinkers told me last spring, just before the start of the war. "We think these are the lessons we have learned. And that, therefore, imperialism as practiced this time will be different."

In "Empire," which appeared last spring, the acclaimed historian Niall Ferguson presented the British Empire as a model of how to secure global stability, foreign investment for developing countries, and simple good government. "What the British Empire proved is that empire is a form of international government that can work—and not just for the benefit of the ruling power," he wrote. Through more than three hundred slick, illustrated pages, Ferguson mapped the past onto the present, identifying the building blocks of Britain's empire with their contemporary American analogues. For Britain's gunboats, America's F-16s and Tomahawk missiles—always prepared to knock around troublemakers on the empire's periphery. For Britain's missionary and social-uplift societies, today's N.G.O.s. In place of Britain's long-running policing action against the slave trade, similarly high-minded campaigns against ethnic cleansing.

Why did the British imperium come to an end? The standard histories tell us about great-power rivalries, a diminishing technological gap between overlords and subjects, growing independence movements among the colonized. Some conservative scholars have suggested, however, that the British Empire fell apart because of war-induced impoverishment and national fatigue. Finally, they say, the Brits just lacked will. But in 2002 America had will in abundance, and more money and guns than the British had ever had. Ferguson was challenging us simply to face up to what we already were. In the closing pages of his book, he wrote, "Americans have taken our old role without yet facing the fact that an empire comes with it." We were, in his view, an empire "that dare not speak its name . . . an empire in denial."

That empire did not arise overnight. It was, after all, under the cover of American military might that Germany and Japan emerged as prosperous and peaceable democracies. And, especially since the end of the Cold War, the apparatus of American power—the aircraft carriers and fighter wings and Army divisions—has come to encircle most of the planet. As Ferguson notes, a map of the British Royal Navy coaling stations that dotted the globe a century ago looks much like the array of bases the United States maintains today.

An "empire of bases" is what Chalmers Johnson calls it in his new book, "The Sorrows of Empire" (Metropolitan; $25). It is not, for him, an edifying spectacle. Much in Johnson's account is no different from what might be found in a host of other left-leaning critiques of American power, but the trajectory of his career sets him apart. For decades, Johnson, an Asia specialist, was one of those stock figures of the Cold War: the defense analyst and academic in constant orbit of the C.I.A. Then, late in his career, he began to reconsider his Cold War commitments, particularly in East Asia. The way America garrisoned allied countries like Japan and South Korea put him in mind of the de-facto empire that the Soviets had created in Eastern Europe. Once he made that turn, he never looked back.

By Johnson's count, in 2001 the United States maintained some seven hundred and twenty-five military installations abroad—an anomalous situation. Foreign troops have never been stationed in this country, and most Americans would probably find the idea of permanent garrisons of German, Mexican, or Indian troops on American soil almost beyond comprehension. And yet in many countries in Europe and East Asia a similar arrangement has been commonplace for generations. A quarter of a million American military personnel (along with a quarter of a million dependents and civilians) are stationed abroad, mostly on the old Cold War frontiers of Germany, Japan, and South Korea. Although, in the last decade, the United States has reduced its military

"footprint" in Europe and the Pacific Rim, more bases have sprung up in the new arc of conflict stretching from the Balkans to the Caspian and into Central Asia. Among these are the sprawling Camp Bondsteel, in Kosovo, and the new Camp Stronghold Freedom, in Uzbekistan, each complete with all the amenities of home for the soldiers stationed there and special treaties designed to protect the troops from local law.

President Clinton came to office intending to keep foreign entanglements to a minimum. That isn't what happened, of course. Despite dire predictions that every military engagement would lead to a quagmire, America found that it could strike with virtual impunity almost anywhere on the globe, and military forays became more common. Back when the superpower rivalry circumscribed America's ability to use force directly, problems were more likely to be solved through high-stakes diplomacy or covert action. Now there is an overwhelming temptation to play to our strength. America's diplomatic corps, already menaced by domestic enemies and falling budgets, is no better than those of other great powers. Our military, on the other hand, dwarfs everyone else's. Hence the progressive militarization of America's foreign policy.

The trend was accelerated by changes in the structure of the military. The Pentagon had for decades divided the world into a series of regional commands—sometimes known as CINCdoms, after the acronym for commander-in-chief, the title held, until recently, by those who command them. (The last of these—CENTCOM, which covers the Middle East, Central and South Asia, and the Horn of Africa—was created in 1983.) But a reorganization of the Pentagon in 1986 vastly increased the power of the CINCs by having them report directly to the President as well as to the Secretary of Defense, unlike the chiefs of the military's four services, who report to civilian secretaries. By the late nineties, the officers who led these commands—men like General Wesley Clark, at the European Command; Marine General Anthony Zinni, at CENTCOM; and Admiral Dennis Blair, at Pacific Command—were far more powerful than the various ambassadors who conduct the nation's diplomatic business in the countries under each CINC's oversight. Johnson notes that when, in October, 1999, General Pervez Musharraf seized power in a bloodless coup in Pakistan, President Clinton called in protest and asked that his call be returned. Musharraf called Zinni instead. "Tony," Musharraf reportedly said, "I want to tell you what I am doing." So the trend hasn't been simply a militarization of foreign policy. It has also been a diplomatization of the American military. In the architecture of empire, the CINCs functioned like proconsuls or regional managers of Pax Americana, with plenty of money and guns and no little ingenuity.

By the end of the decade, the United States had established two protectorates under the aegis of NATO and the U.N., intervened or helped intervene in five countries or provinces (Bosnia, East Timor, Haiti, Kosovo, and Somalia), and practiced some form of gunboat diplomacy against Afghanistan, China, North Korea, Sudan, and, almost constantly, Iraq. These wars were neither defensive nor offensive. They were policing actions, small wars of management—of, in a sense, imperial management, like the "little wars" that were a backdrop to life in Victorian England. Similarly, the United States Treasury worked through the I.M.F. and the World Bank to head off a Mexican financial collapse in 1995, and did much the same thing in 1997 to contain the so-called "Asian flu." Step by step, America took on the job, often with others but sometimes alone, of enforcing order in almost every corner of the globe.

If America, militarily unchallenged and economically dominant, indeed took on the functions of imperial governance, its empire was, for the most part, loose and consensual. In the past couple of years, however, neo-imperialism, this thing of stealth, politesse, and obliquity, has come to seem, so to speak, too neo. Especially as the war on terror began, hard-liners who were frustrated by Clinton's bumbling and hesitations saw no reason to deny that America was an imperial power, and a great one: how else to describe a country that had so easily vanquished Afghanistan, once legendary as the graveyard of empires? The only question was whether America would start running its empire with

foresight and determination, rather than leaving it to chance, drift, and disaster.

The Bush doctrine, with its tenets of preëmptive war, regime change, and permanent American military primacy, promised a new global order. The best way to think of that order is by analogy with the internal organization of a nation-state. What makes a state a state is its monopoly over the legitimate use of force, which means that citizens don't have to worry about arming to defend themselves against each other. Instead, they can focus on productive pursuits like raising families, making money, and enjoying their leisure time. In the world of the Bush doctrine, states take the place of citizens. As the President told graduating cadets at West Point in 2002, America intends to keep its "military strengths beyond challenge, thereby making the destabilizing arms races of other eras pointless, and limiting rivalries to trade and other pursuits of peace." In other words, if America has an effective monopoly on the exercise of military force, other countries should be able to set aside the distractions of arming and plotting against each other and put their energies into producing consumer electronics, textiles, tea. What the Bush doctrine calls for—paradoxically, given its proponents—is a form of world government.

The new order envisaged by the Bush doctrine hasn't quite worked out as it was meant to. That's because, from the beginning, the White House has acted on the assumption that bold action would make our allies rally behind us and our enemies cower. Building a consensus with our friends before we acted only encouraged quarrelsomeness. The point wasn't that dictation was superior to consensus; the point was that it *created* consensus.

Again and again, things didn't turn out that way. In March, 2002, Dick Cheney, in his only trip abroad as Vice-President before last week, toured Middle Eastern capitals to line up support for the war against Iraq. Foreign leaders used the occasion to denounce the planned attack. A week after Cheney's return, the Saudis and the Kuwaitis were arranging their first rapprochement with Iraq since the Gulf War. In the months preceding the second Gulf War, a year later, the Administration was castigated for bungled diplomacy with its allies. But the real problem was that, though America could do as it liked, its erstwhile allies didn't necessarily fall in line.

"Bill Clinton was actually a much more effective imperialist than George W. Bush," Chalmers Johnson writes darkly. "During the Clinton administration, the United States employed an indirect approach in imposing its will on other nations." That "indirect approach" might more properly be termed a policy of leading by consensus rather than by dictation. But Johnson is right about its superior efficacy. American power is magnified when it is embedded in international institutions, as leftists have lamented. It is also somewhat constrained, as conservatives have lamented. This is precisely the covenant on which American supremacy has been based. The trouble is that hard-line critics of multilateralism focussed on how that power was constrained and missed how it was magnified.

Conservative ideologues, in calling for an international order in which America would have a statelike monopoly on coercive force, somehow forgot what makes for a successful state. Stable governments rule not by direct coercion but by establishing a shared sense of allegiance. In an old formula, "domination" gives way to "hegemony"—brute force gives way to the deeper power of consent. This is why the classic definition of the state speaks of *legitimate* force. In a constitutional order, government accepts certain checks on its authority, but the result is to deepen that authority, rather than to diminish it. Legitimacy is the ultimate "force multiplier," in military argot. And if your aim is to maintain a global order, as opposed to rousting this or that pariah regime, you need all the force multipliers you can get.

The empire-makers of 2002 weakened America's covert empire because, at a critical level, they didn't understand how it worked. As Ivo Daalder and James Lindsay note in "America Unbound" (Brookings; $22.95), a new history of Bush's foreign policy, Administration hawks believe that American global supremacy is possible not only because America is a uniquely just nation but because others around the globe see it as such. The current unipolar state of the world is the best evidence of this: because most countries see American power as being more benign than not, they acquiesce in it. But this acquiescence isn't irreversible.

In ways that many hawks have been slow to realize, the demise of the Soviet Union has had a paradoxical effect on America's role in the world. What has made the United States more powerful militarily has made it weaker politically. For half a century, American policymakers had been accustomed to habits of deference from democratic allies in Europe and Asia. Yet fear of the Soviets was responsible for much of that deference. That's why, in the decade after the Cold War, the makers of our foreign policy recognized that America could best protect its supremacy by making sure that smaller countries felt, even in some small measure, that they had been "dealt in." This was one function of those balky international organizations, and not the least important objective of international diplomacy.

The current Administration has, of course, taken a different tack. As Fareed Zakaria observed last year, after speaking to government officials in dozens of countries around the world, almost every country that has had dealings with the Bush Administration has felt humiliated by it. America isn't powerful because people like us: our power is a product of dollars and guns. But when people think that America's unique role in the world is basically legitimate, that power becomes less costly to exert and to sustain. People around the world have respected and admired American power because of the way America has acted. If it acts differently, the perceptions of American benevolence can start to ebb—and, to judge from any public-opinion poll from abroad over the last year, that's essentially what has happened. When it comes to political capital, too, this is an Administration with a weakness for deficit spending.

There are signs that the Administration may be capable of adjusting its course. Last month, James A. Baker III was dispatched as an envoy to Europe, ostensibly to negotiate debt restructuring but with an unstated brief of fence-mending. On the Korean peninsula, where our initial "no deals" posturing proved futile, the United States has been working with Russia, China, Japan, and South Korea, and offering North Korea a "multilateral security pledge." President Bush now speaks about the virtues of "a collective voice trying to convince a leader to change behavior."

Not all conservatives have been chastened by the setbacks of unilateralism; some have been stoked to greater outrage and resolve. This much is clear from "An End to Evil" (Random House; $25.95), by David Frum, a former Bush speechwriter, who helped coin the phrase "axis of evil," and Richard Perle, a former chairman of the Defense Policy Board. Rising disapproval from abroad doesn't lead Frum and Perle to question their policies. It just confirms them in the belief that America has even more enemies than it realized.

"An End to Evil" is a call to stay the course in an unremitting battle, and to resist the slide toward appeasement and defeatism. "We have to cast off once and for all the 1970s cynicism that sneered from the back of the classroom at the joiner and volunteer," the authors write in a typical passage. Their fury is directed almost as much against America's internal enemies as its external ones. And the fury directed abroad is boundless. The book conveys a general sense that America is at war with Islam itself, anywhere and everywhere: the contemporary Muslim world, with the exception of a few irenic clerics and a few secular intellectuals, is depicted as one great cauldron of hate, murder, obscurantism, and deceit. If our Muslim adversaries are not to destroy Western civilization,

we must gird for more battles.

The authors advise toppling more regimes in the Middle East, treating the French and the Saudis as the enemies they are, squeezing China, and launching an air and naval blockade against North Korea. At home, they propose aggressive reform in the State Department, the C.I.A., and the armed forces. "Friends and Foes," the penultimate chapter, turns out to discuss only foes. In sum, the prescription amounts to war, cold or hot, against pretty much everyone, everywhere, all the time—until everyone relents. And, if that doesn't do the trick, more war.

The significance of "An End to Evil" is as much in its tone as in its policies. An illuminating contrast can be made with a book published a year ago, William Kristol and Lawrence Kaplan's "The War Over Iraq," a curiously sunny brief for regime change in Iraq as the cornerstone of a new Pax Americana. The Victorian cant of empire always had a tone of mastery, rather than bellicosity, and the talk of 2002 had just that air of masterful confidence. Great powers, after all, are normally custodians of peace and stability. Why shouldn't they be? They're already on top. Historically, it has been "revisionist" powers that have had an interest in upending settled arrangements and sowing unrest. Like Wilhelmine Germany at the start of the last century, they stir up trouble and look for ways to overturn a world system that has held them down. For Perle and Frum, America is the revisionist power in the midst of its own imperium.

In this latest turn of neoconservative thought, the trappings of optimism and the hopeful talk of a liberal-democratic domino effect have been abandoned. Where Ferguson is all cool confidence, Perle and Frum are fire and foreboding. Theirs are not policies that would lead to the end of evil; they might well, in the long run, lead to the end of empire.

Hard-liners like Perle and Frum would do well to remember that America began as an empire, formally and officially. It wasn't our empire, of course; it was Britain's. And the story of how Britain lost its first empire may be more instructive for Americans today than how Britain found itself without its second. Americans like to flatter themselves that the seeds of independence were planted with the first spades into the earth of Massachusetts and Virginia. In fact, during the century before the Revolution, Britain's North American colonies were, by most measures, becoming more Anglicized, more firmly tied to Britain's monarchy and trade. (The archetype of American homespun virtues, Ben Franklin, spent much of his life trying to make a name in London and find a place for himself in the British establishment.) Britain lost its North American empire through a common mistake: it misunderstood the nature of its power. In particular, it confused the power it had on paper—its claims to sovereignty and dominion—with the nature of the control it exercised on the coast of North America.

Britain's hold in North America was, at heart, a consensual arrangement. Over more than a century, the home government had reduced most of the settlements to Crown colonies with royally appointed governors. But London did not exercise what historians call government in depth. It had little sway in the family and business networks that held the colonies together. In fact, outside a few port towns, the Crown had to rely on local bigwigs—the New England merchants and Virginia planters—to wield authority in its name.

For years, the status quo persisted. The menace posed by Britain's imperial rival, France, helped keep the colonies in line. But by the early seventeen-sixties Britain had successfully prosecuted a world war with France, a conflict that began when a twenty-two-year-old lieutenant colonel in the Virginia militia named George Washington attacked French troops not far from the site of modern-day Pittsburgh. The conflict quickly spread from North America to the German states, India, and the Caribbean. The Seven Years' War—which the colonists called the French and Indian War—left Britain the master of North America and the dominant imperial power around the globe, with

the most formidable navy the world had ever seen. Still, the war had been costly, and London suddenly looked on America with an eye to just how much wealth it could extract from it.

The result was a dozen years of contention over taxes, which exploded into arguments over principle, and the loss of Britain's most valuable imperial possessions. Britain believed that the reins of monarchical allegiance would keep its colonies secure; but when it pulled back on those reins, they fell apart. The truth is that, once Britain got to the point of holding on to its colonists by force, it had already all but lost them. Vengeful France, using its runner-up navy to such effect at Yorktown, merely provided the coup de grâce. Britain thought it was at its strongest. Yet by knocking out the rival that drove the colonies into its arms, and then changing the rules, Britain had actually become weaker.

Historical analogies are never perfect. America's power is far too great to be easily or quickly dislodged. But there are lessons to be learned here, and not just about the French gift for making trouble for great nations at the apex of their power.