

Iraq and the Ascendancy of American Power and Domination

Frank Stewart

For years the United States government has had an active policy of direct and announced intervention in the affairs of Central and South America: Cuba, Nicaragua, Panama, Chile, Guatemala, Salvador, Grenada have had attacks made on their sovereignty ranging from outright war to coups and proclaimed subversion, from assassination attempts to the financing of "contra" armies. In East Asia the United States fought two large wars, sponsored massive military drives that caused hundreds of thousands of deaths at the hands of a "friendly" government (Indonesia in East Timor), overturned governments (Iran in 1953) and supported states in lawless activity, violating the Fourth Geneva Convention, flouting United Nations resolutions and contravening stated policy (Turkey, Israel). The official line most of the time is that the United States is defending its interests, maintaining order, bringing justice to bear upon injustice and misbehavior. Yet, in the case of Iraq in the first Gulf War, the United States used the United Nations Security Council to push through resolutions for war, at the same time in numerous other instances (Israel chief among them) United Nations resolutions supported by the United States were unenforced or ignored, and the United States had unpaid dues to the United Nations of several hundred million dollars. In Gulf War II, the United Nations Security council was ignored despite the fact that international law and the UN Charter do not allow "regime change" of dictatorships by military intervention and actions with such design constitutes straightforward aggression.

Dissenting literature has always survived in the United States alongside the authorized public space; this literature can be described as oppositional to the overall national and official performance. There are revisionist historians such as William Appleton Williams, Gabriel Kolko, and Howard Zinn, powerful public critics like Noam Chomsky, Richard Barnet, Richard Falk and Edward Said, and many others, all of them prominent not only as individuals voices but as members of a fairly substantial alternative and anti-im-

perial current within the country. With them go such Left-liberal journals as *The Nation*, *The Progressive*, *Z Magazine*, *In These Times* and, when its author was alive, I. F. Stone's *Weekly*. How much of a following there is for such views as represented by the opposition is very difficult to say; there has always been an opposition — one thinks of anti-imperialists like Mark Twain, William James, and Randolph Bourne — but the depressing truth is that its deterrent power has not been effective. Such views as opposed the United States attack of Iraq in Gulf War I and invasion in Gulf War II did nothing at all to stop, postpone or lessen the horrendous force. What prevailed was an extraordinary mainstream consensus in which the rhetoric of the government, the policymakers, the military, think tanks, media, and academic centers converged on the necessity of United States force and the ultimate justice of its projection, for which a long history of theorists and apologists from Andrew Jackson through Theodore Roosevelt to Henry Kissinger and Robert Tucker to Paul Wolfowitz and Donald Rumsfeld furnished the preparation.

A correspondence is evident, but frequently disguised or forgotten, between the nineteenth-century doctrine of Manifest Destiny (the title of an 1890 book by John Fiske), the territorial expansion of the United States, the enormous literature of justification historical mission, moral regeneration, the expansion of freedom: all of these studied in Albert Weinberg's massively documented 1958 work *Manifest Destiny*, and the ceaselessly repeated formulae about the need for an American intervention against this or that aggression since World War Two. The correspondence is rarely made explicit, and indeed disappears when the public drums of war are sounded and hundreds of thousands of tons of bombs are dropped on a distant and mostly unknown enemy. The intellectual blotting-out of what "we" do in the process interests me, since it is obvious that no imperial mission or scheme can ever ultimately succeed in maintaining overseas control forever; history also teaches us that domination breeds resistance, and that the violence inherent in the imperial contest — for all its occasional profit or pleasure — is an impoverishment for both sides. These truths hold in an era saturated with the memory of past imperialisms. There are far too many politicized people on earth today for any nation readily to

accept the finality of America's historical mission to lead the world.

Enough work has been done by American cultural historians for us to understand the source of the drive to domination on a world scale as well as the way that drive is represented and made acceptable. Richard Slotkin argues, in *Regeneration Through Violence*, that the shaping experience of American history was the extended wars with the native American Indians; this in turn produced an image of Americans not as plain killers (D. H. Lawrence said of them) but as "a new race of people, independent of the sin-darkened heritage of man, seeking a totally new and original relationship to pure nature as hunters, explorers, pioneers and seekers." Such imagery keeps recurring in nineteenth-century literature, most memorably in Melville's *Moby-Dick*, where as C.L.R. James and V. G. Kiernan have argued from a non-American perspective, Captain Ahab is an allegorical representation of the American world quest: he is obsessed, compelling, unstoppable, completely wrapped up in his own rhetorical justification and his sense of cosmic symbolism.

No one would want to reduce Melville's great work to a mere literary decoration of events in the real world; besides, Melville himself was very critical of what Ahab was up to as an American. Yet the fact is that during the nineteenth-century the United States *did* expand territorially, most often at the expense of native peoples, and in time came to gain hegemony over the North American continent and the territories and seas adjacent to it. Nineteenth-century offshore experiences ranged from the North African coast to the Philippines, China, Hawaii, and of course throughout the Caribbean and Central America. The broad tendency was to expand and extend control farther, and not to spend much time reflecting on the integrity and independence of Others, for whom the American presence was at very best a mixed blessing.

An extraordinary, but historically typical, example of American willfulness can be seen in the relationship between Haiti and the United States. As J. Michael Dash reads it in *Haiti and the United States: National Stereotypes and the Literary Imagination*, almost from the moment Haiti gained its independence as a Black republic in 1803 Americans tended to imagine it as a void into which they could pour their own ideas. Abolitionists, says Dash,

thought of Haiti not as a place with its own integrity and people but as a convenient site for relocating freed slaves. Later the island and its people came to represent degeneracy and of course racial inferiority. The United States occupied the island in 1915 (and Nicaragua in 1916) and set in place a native tyranny that exacerbated an already desperate state of affairs. And when in 1991 and 1992 thousands of Haitians refugees tried to gain entry into Florida, most were forcibly returned.

Few Americans have agonized over places like Haiti or Iraq once the crisis or their country's actual intervention was over, especially Iraq which was considered to be a threat to the United States. In such a case, the best that American policy makers can come up with is a blanket embargo (Cuba and Iran) or punitive sanctions, which is the functional equivalent of believing that the country must not exist at all. The sadism of such a policy is difficult to believe. As Eric Rouleau showed in a compelling article that appeared in a January-February 1995 issue of *Foreign affairs* (buttressed over the years by WHO and United Nation's studies), the embargo against Iraq had brought about a human disaster of unimaginable proportions. An astronomical rate of infant mortality (Iraqi children are the most malnourished the Middle East), massive shortages of food and medicine and the overall destruction of the economy, had reduced Iraq to pre-industrial status, even though in all significant respects it had complied with the UN provisions concerning sanctions. And this was long before the present American invasion and subsequent destruction of the institutions and infrastructure of Iraqi society. The sheer cruelty of the United States and British position and assault is hard to believe, but went on anyway, with thousands of innocents suffering on behalf of a departed tyrant.

Granted that American expansion is principally economic, it is still highly dependent and moves together with, upon, cultural ideas and ideologies about American itself, ceaselessly reiterated in public. "An economic system," V. G. Kiernan rightly reminds us, "like a nation or a religion, lives not by bread alone, but by beliefs, visions, daydreams as well, and these may be no less vital to it for being erroneous." There is a kind of monotony to the regularity of schemes, phrases, or theories produced by successive generations to justify the serious responsibilities of American

global reach. This present moment in American hegemonic history is only personified a little differently with the advent of 9/11 and Osama Bin Ladin.

As detailed in the 35-page paper, "The National Security Strategy of the United States of America," issued by the White House on September 20, 2002, the doctrine's main points are: 1) American military power should remain "beyond challenge" in the foreseeable future; 2) since the main enemy today is an "irrational" fundamentalist who, in contrast to the communists, lacks even the elementary sense of survival and respect for his own people, America has the right to "pre-emptive" strike; 3) while the United States should seek ad hoc international conditions for such attacks, it reserves the right to act independently without international support. So while the United States presents its domination over other sovereign states as grounded in a benevolent paternalism that takes into account the interests of other states, it reserves for itself the ultimate right to define its allies' "true" interests. Even the pretense of a neutral international law is abandoned, since, when the United States perceives a potential threat, it formally asks its allies to support them. But the allies' agreement is optional; the underlying message is always, "We will do it with or without you." You are free to agree, but not free to disagree. The Bush doctrine reproduces the old paradox of the forced choice: the freedom to make a choice on condition that one makes the right choice.

The United States was displeased with Gerald Schroder in last September 02, when he won re-election largely thanks to his firm stance against American military intervention in Iraq, because he did what a normal politician in a functioning democracy and a leader of a sovereign state would do. He agreed that the Iraqi regime is a threat, but he disagreed with the way the U. S. government proposed to deal with that threat — thereby stating an opinion shared not only by majorities in Germany and many other states, but also by a considerable percentage of the American people and Congress at that time. Schroeder's skepticism was a real-life "minority report" signaling his disagreement with the way others saw the future — and thus he was the first to get the full taste of the Bush doctrine.

The problem with today's Bush doctrine is that it leaves no room for the "realistic" possibility of chance or the unforeseen that sustained the MAD

(“mutually assured destruction”) logic elaborated at the height of the Cold War. The Bush doctrine instead relies on the violent assertion of the paranoid logic of total control over some *future* threat, and pre-emptively strikes against it. Such an approach in today’s universe is patently inept. The loop between the present and the future is closed: The prospect of a breathtaking terrorist act is evoked in order to justify incessant preemptive strikes now. The state in which we presently live, in the “war on terror,” is one of the endlessly suspended terrorist threat: The catastrophe is taken for granted, yet endlessly postponed — whatever will actually happen, even if it will be much more horrible than 9/11, will not yet be *that*. The true catastrophe *already* is this life under the shadow of the permanent threat of catastrophe.

In one of his most famous early critical essays, T. S. Eliot takes up the question of whether indeed the past is past, over or concluded or whether it continues, albeit in different forms, perhaps. Although the occasion as well as the intention of his essay is almost purely aesthetic, one can use his formulations to inform other realms of experience. The poet Eliot says, is obviously an individual talent, but he works within a tradition that cannot be merely inherited but can only be obtained “by great labour.” Tradition, he continues,

involves, in the first place, the historical sense, which we may call nearly indispensable to anyone who would continue to be a poet beyond his twenty-fifth year, and the historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence; the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order. This historical sense, which is a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional. And it is at the same time what makes a writer most acutely conscious of his place in time, of his own

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contemporaneity. No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone.

Eliot's synthesis of past, present, and future, however, is idealistic and in important ways a function of his own peculiar history; also, its conception of time leaves out the combativeness with which individuals and institutions decide on what is tradition and what is not, what is relevant and what is not. But his central idea is valid: how we formulate or represent the past shapes our understanding and views of the present. Let me give an example. During the first Gulf War of 1990-1991, the collision between Iraq and the United States was a function of two fundamentally opposed histories, each used to advantage by the official establishment of each country. As construed by the Iraqi Baath Party, modern Arab history shows the unrealized, unfulfilled promise of Arab independence, a promise traduced both by "the West" and by a whole array of more recent enemies, like Arab reaction and Zionism. Iraq's bloody occupation of Kuwait was, therefore, justified not only on Bismarckian grounds, but also because it was believed that the Arabs had to right the wrongs done against them and wrest from imperialism one of its greatest prizes. Conversely, in the American view of the past, the United States was not a classical imperial power, but a righter of wrongs around the world, in pursuit of tyranny, in defense of freedom no matter the place or cost. The war inevitably pitted these versions of the past against each other and continue to in the present occupation of Iraq.

Eliot's ideas about the complexity of the relationship between past and present are particularly suggestive in the debate over the meaning of "imperialism," a word and an idea today so controversial, so fraught with all sorts of questions, doubts, polemics, and ideological premises as nearly to resist use altogether. To some extent of course the debate involves definitions and attempts at delimitations of the very notion: was imperialism principally economic, how far did it extend, what were its causes, was it systematic, when (or whether) did it end? The roll call of names who have contributed to the discussion in Europe and America is impressive: Kautsky, Hulferding, Luxemburg, Hobson, Lenin, Schumpeter, Arendt, Magdoff, Paul

Kennedy. And in recent years such works published in the United States as Paul Kennedy's *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*, the revisionist history of William Appleman Williams, Gabriel Kolko, Noam Chomsky, Howard Zinn, Walter Lefebvre and Edward Said, and studious defense of explanations of American policy as non-imperialist written by various strategists, theoreticians, and sages — all this kept the question of imperialism, and its applicability (or not) to the United States, the main power of the day, very much alive and actual today in Iraq.

In the West, representation of the Arab world ever since the 1967 War have been crude, reductionist, coarsely racist, as much critical literature in Europe and the United States has ascertained and verified. Yet films and television shows portraying Arabs as sleazy “camel-jockeys,” “sand-niggers,” terrorists, and offensively wealthy “sheikhs” pour forth anyway. When the media mobilized behind both President Bush's instructions to preserve the American way of life and to roll Iraq back, little was said or shown about the political, social, cultural actualities of the Arab world (many of them deeply influenced by the United States), actualities that made possible both the appalling figure of Saddam Hussein and at the same time a complex set of other, radically different configurations — the Arabic novel (whose preeminent practitioner, Naguib Mahfouz, won the 1988 Nobel Prize) and the many institutions surviving in what was left of civil society. While it is certainly true that the media is far better equipped to deal with caricature and sensation than with the slower processes of culture and society, the deeper reasons for these misconceptions is the imperial dynamic and above all its separating, essentializing, dominating, and reactive tendencies.

Self-definition is one of the activities practiced by all cultures: it has a rhetoric, a set of occasions and authorities (national feasts, for example, time of crisis, founding fathers, basic texts, and so on), and a familiarity all its own. Yet in a world tied together as never before by the exigencies of electronic communication, trade, travel, environmental and regional conflicts that can expand with tremendous speed, the assertion of identity is by no means a ceremonial matter. What strikes me as especially dangerous is that it can mobilize passions atavistically, throwing people back to an earlier

imperial time when the West and its opponents championed and even embodied virtues designed not as virtues so to speak but for war.

Yet before the media go abroad so to speak, and in this case, embedded in the American and British machinery of war, they are effective in representing strange and threatening foreign cultures (Iraq) for the home audience, rarely with more success in creating an appetite for hostility and violence against these cultural "Others" than during both Gulf Wars. Nineteenth-century Britain and France used to send expeditionary forces to bomb natives — "it appears," Conrad's Marlow says as he gets to Africa, "that the French had one of their wars going on thereabouts....In the empty immensity of earth, sky, and water, there she [a French man-of-war] was, incomprehensible, firing into a continent. Pop, would go one of the six-inch guns" — now the United States does it.

Historically the American, and perhaps generally the Western media have been sensory extensions of the main cultural context. Arabs are only attenuated recent examples of Others who have incurred the wrath of a stern White Man, a kind of Puritan superego whose errand into the wilderness knows few boundaries and who will go to great lengths indeed to make his points. Yet of course the word "imperialism" was a conspicuously missing ingredient in American discussions about the Gulf. "In the United States," according to historian Richard W. Van Alstyne in *The Rising American Empire*, "it is almost heresy to describe the nation as an empire." Yet he shows that the early founders of the Republic, including George Washington, characterized the country as an empire, with a subsequent foreign policy that renounced revolution and promoted imperial growth. He quotes one statesman after another arguing, as Reinhold Niebuhr put it caustically, that the country was "God's American Israel," whose "mission" was to be "trustee under God of the civilization of the world." It was therefore difficult not to hear echoes of that same grandiose self-endowment at the time of this most recent Gulf War. And as the perceived Iraqi non-compliance with U. N. mandates seemed to mutate into defiance before the collective eyes of the nation, Saddam became Hitler, the butcher and thief of Baghdad, the architect of one of the axes of "evil."

Anyone who has read *Moby Dick* may have found it irresistible to

extrapolate from that great novel to the real world, to see the American empire preparing once again, like Ahab, to take after an imputed evil. First comes the unexamined moral mission, then, in the media, its military-geo-strategic extension. The most disheartening thing about the media — aside from their sheepishly following the government policy model, mobilizing for war right from the start — was their trafficking in “expert” Middle East lore, supposedly well-informed about Arabs. All roads lead to the Bazaar; Arabs only understand force; brutality and violence are part of Arab civilization, Islam is an intolerant, segregationist, “medieval,” fanatic, cruel, anti-woman religion. The context, framework, setting of any discussion was limited, indeed frozen, by these ideas. There seemed considerable but inexplicable enjoyment to be had in the prospect once again after the Taliban were swept from power in Afghanistan, that at last “the Arabs” as represented by Saddam were going to get their comeuppance. Many scores would be settled against various old enemies of the West: Palestinians, Arab nationalism, Islamic civilization and of course terrorism.

What got left out was enormous. Little was reported on oil company profits, or how the surge in oil prices had little to do with supply; oil continued to be overproduced. The Iraqi insistence that they did not possess weapons of mass destruction, reaffirmed by captured high ranking officials, received next to no hearing. Little was said or analyzed about the complicity and hypocrisy of allowing Israel to possess massive arsenals of biological weapons in addition to nuclear subs and warheads. There were efforts made by a small handful of scholars to analyze the popular rallying of some Arabs to Saddam, despite the unattractiveness of his rule, but these efforts were not integrated into, or allowed equal time with the peculiar inflections of American policy, which for a time promoted Saddam, then demonized him and finally deposed him.

It is curious and profoundly symptomatic of this Gulf conflict that one word that was tediously pronounced and repronounced and yet left unanalyzed was “linkage,” a ugly solecism that seems to have been invented as a symbol of the unexamined American right to ignore or include whole geographical sections of the globe in its considerations.

During this Gulf crisis “linkage” meant not that there was any: linking

Saddam, the leader of the most secularized state in the Middle East with Bin Ladin, a man intent upon establishing a theocratic state — was just implausible. But this “linkage” indeed, meant there was no connection between things that in fact belonged together by common association, sense, geography, history. These were sundered, left apart for convenience’s sake and for the benefit of imperious United States policymakers, military strategist, area experts. Every one his own carver, said Jonathan Swift. That the Middle East was linked internally by all sorts of ties — *that* was irrelevant. That Arabs might have seen a connection between Saddam in Kuwait (which started the whole messy imbroglio with him and us with Al-Qaeda) say, Turkey in Cyprus — that too was pointless. That United States policy itself was a linkage was a forbidden topic, most of all for pundits whose role was to manage popular consent for war.

The entire premise was colonial: that a small Third World dictatorship, nurtured and supported by the West, did not have the right to challenge America, which was white and superior. Britain bombed Iraqi troops in the 1920s for daring to resist colonial rule; seventy years later the United States did it and did it again twelve years after but with a more moralistic tone, which did little to conceal the thesis that the Middle East oil reserves were an American trust. Such practices are anachronistic and supremely mischievous, since they not only make wars continuously possible and attractive, but prevent a secure knowledge of history, diplomacy, and politics from having the importance it should.

Democracy in any real sense of the word is nowhere to be found in the still “nationalistic” Middle East: there are either privileged oligarchies or privileged ethnic groups. The large mass of people is crushed beneath dictatorship or unyielding, unresponsive, unpopular governments. But the notion that the United States is a virtuous innocent in this dreadful state of affairs is unacceptable, as is the proposition that the Gulf War was not a war between George Bush and Saddam Hussein — it most certainly was — and that the United States acted solely and principally in the interests of purging the world of the scourge of terrorism. At bottom it was a personalized struggle between, on the one hand, a Third World dictator of the kind that the United States has long dealt with (Haile Selassie, Somoza, Syngman

Rhee, the Shah of Iran, Sukarno, Suharto, Pinochet, Marcos Duvalier, Noriego, etc.), whose rule it encouraged, whose favors it long enjoyed, and, on the other, the president of a country which had taken on the mantle of empire inherited from Britain and France and was determined to remain in the Middle East for its oil and for reasons of geo-strategic and political advantage.

For two generations the United States has sided in the Middle East mostly with tyranny and injustice. No struggle for democracy, or women's rights, or secularism and the rights of minorities has the United States officially supported. Instead one administration after another has propped up compliant and unpopular clients, and turned away from efforts of small people to liberate themselves from military occupation, while subsidizing their enemies. The United States has prompted unlimited militarism and (along with France, Britain, China, Germany, and others) engaged in vast arms sales everywhere in the region, mostly to governments which were driven to more and more extreme positions as a results of the United States' obsession with, and exaggeration of the power of Saddam Hussein. To conceive of a post-war Arab world dominated by the rulers of Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Syria, all of them working in a new Pax Americana as part of the New World Order is neither intellectually nor morally credible. For the United States to import Chalabi into Iraq, a bank robber, a convicted felon, who had an international warrant issued for his arrest by the Jordanian government (since recinded by pressure by the U. S.) and has been implicated in bank fraud in Lebanon as well — to impose him upon the Iraqi people is simply immoral. He is unfit to rule. His leadership is as immoral as it was for American forces to foment the chaos and disorder that it did and then stand back in the aftermath and watch the looting and riot and then shake their heads about how incorrigible the natives are.

There has not yet developed a discourse in the American public space that does anything more than identify with power, despite the dangers of that power in a world which has shrunk so small and has become so impressively interconnected and so profoundly shaken by 9/11. This aside, the United States cannot belligerently presume the right, with 6 percent of the world's population, to consume 30 percent of the world's energy, for

example. But that is not all. For decades in America there has been a cultural war against Arabs and Islam: appalling racist caricatures of Arabs and muslims suggest that they are all either terrorists or sheikhs, and that the region is a large arid slum, fit only for profit or war. The very notion that there might be a history, a culture, a society — indeed many societies — has not held the stage for more than a moment or two, not even during the chorus of voices proclaiming the virtues of “multiculturalism.”

The world is full of cultural, religious, and political conflicts, most of them of short duration, some of them very long. Arabs and Americans, as I just mentioned, are parties to the opposing sides of what appears to be one of the longest, the deepest and most complex conflicts of the modern world, that between the Arab-Islamic world on the one hand, and on the other, the Western, and more particularly the North Atlantic world. The behavior of the Iraqi regime had been disgracefully repressive at home and deplorable in its annexation and occupation in Kuwait. This brought destruction upon its own people, first through American bombing and mass devastation, then through a merciless persecution of its own population, especially the Kurds, grievously sinned against, persecuted, betrayed and in danger yet again of being abandoned. Certainly Iraq's government did important things domestically to build a secular society, to take major steps in development, education, health, agriculture, oil and housing. But along with almost all the other Arab governments it did very little — quite the contrary — for human rights. Democracy did not exist as a result but dictatorship which cannot at all be characterized as having anything to do with the best things about Arabism, Arab civilization, or the Arab people. Neither for that matter has the restored government of Kuwait done itself credit, as the abuse of innocent expatriates continues, the mindless corruption and despotism remain unruffled and the likelihood of further stagnation, inaction, political hopelessness increase each day. So far as the United States is concerned, this was another imperial intervention, activated by oil, not principles, mainly to consolidate a faltering empire, distract attention from the troubles at home (from a massive surplus Clinton left to a complete swing to a purported \$7 trillion deficit), gather in some triumphalism and military aura at the expense of a tailor-made villain.

As I said a moment ago, this war must really be seen as an episode in a longer and deeper contest. Recall that after its European wars, for instance, the United States quickly came to terms with Europe; the same was true of Japan and with Indochina which even after both wars were devastated, seem to have settled into a sustained mode of doing business with the United States. With its other antagonists we do not therefore feel that the conflict lingers on after the guns fall silent. Only with the Arab-Islamic world does one feel that after this particularly violent chapter the problems remain unsolved, pretty much simmering beneath the surface. There are wounds, betrayals, misunderstanding and antipathies that seem to be reproduced generation after generation, each of them quite different but each of them sharing with all the others the sense that an over-all contest between the West and Islam is still in place and still unresolved. To this level of tension President Bush has never addressed himself — and more's the pity.