

# Imperial Temptations

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—Jack Snyder—

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AMERICA TODAY embodies a paradox of omnipotence and vulnerability. The U.S. military budget is greater than those of the next 14 countries combined and the American economy is larger than the next three combined. Yet Americans going about their daily lives face a greater risk of sudden death from terrorist attack than ever before. This situation has fostered a psychology of vulnerability that makes Americans hyperalert to foreign dangers and predisposed to use military power in what may be self-defeating attempts to escape their fears.

The Bush Administration's new national security doctrine, which provides a superficially attractive rationale for preventive war, reflects this uneasy state of mind.<sup>1</sup> In an open society, no strictly defensive strategy against terrorism can be foolproof. Similarly, deterring terrorist attack by the threat of retaliation seems impossible when the potential attackers welcome suicide. Bizarre or diabolical leaders of potentially nuclear-armed rogue states may likewise seem undeterrable. If so, attacking the sources of

potential threats before they can mount their own attacks may seem the only safe option. Such a strategy presents a great temptation to a country as strong as the United States, which can project overwhelming military power to any spot on the globe.

In adopting this strategy, however, America risks marching in the well-trod footsteps of virtually every imperial power of the modern age. America has no formal colonial empire and seeks none, but like other great powers over the past two centuries, it has sometimes sought to impose peace on the tortured politics of weaker societies. Consequently, it faces many of the same strategic dilemmas as did the great powers that have gone before it. The Bush Administration's rhetoric of preventive war, however, does not reflect a sober appreciation of the American predicament, but instead echoes point by point the disastrous strategic ideas of those earlier keepers of imperial order.

## *Imperial Overstretch*

LIKE AMERICA, the great empires of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries enjoyed huge asymmetries of power relative to the societies

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<sup>1</sup>Office of the President, *National Security Strategy of the United States* [hereafter *NSS*], September 2002.

at their periphery, yet they rightly feared disruptive attack from unruly peoples along the turbulent frontier of empire. Suspecting that their empires were houses of cards, imperial rulers feared that unchecked defiance on the periphery might cascade toward the imperial core. Repeatedly they tried the strategy of preventive attack to nip challenges in the bud and prevent their spread.

Typically, the preventive use of force proved counterproductive for imperial security because it often sparked endless brushfire wars at the edges of the empire, internal rebellions, and opposition from powers not yet conquered or otherwise subdued. Historically, the preventive pacification of one turbulent frontier of empire has usually led to the creation of another one, adjacent to the first. When the British conquered what is now Pakistan, for example, the turbulent frontier simply moved to neighboring Afghanistan. It was impossible to conquer everyone, so there was always another frontier.

Even inside well-established areas of imperial control, the use of repressive force against opponents often created a backlash among subjects who came to reassess the relative dangers and benefits of submission. The Amritsar massacre of 1919, for example, was the death knell for British India because it radicalized a formerly circumspect opposition. Moreover, the preventive use of force inside the empire and along its frontiers often intensified resistance from independent powers outside the empire who feared that unchecked, ruthless imperial force would soon encroach upon them. In other words, the balance of power kicked in. Through all of these mechanisms, empires have typically found that the preventive use of force expanded their security problems instead of ameliorating them.

As the dynamic of imperial overstretch became clearer, many of the great

powers decided to solve their security dilemmas through even bolder preventive offensives. None of these efforts worked. To secure their European holdings, Napoleon and Hitler marched to Moscow, only to be engulfed in the Russian winter. Kaiser Wilhelm's Germany tried to break the allies' encirclement through unrestricted submarine warfare, which brought America's industrial might into the war against it. Imperial Japan, facing a quagmire in China and a U.S. oil embargo, tried to break what it saw as impending encirclement by seizing the Indonesian oil fields and preventively attacking Pearl Harbor. All sought security through expansion, and all ended in imperial collapse.

Some great powers, however, have pulled back from overstretch and husbanded their power for another day. Democratic great powers, notably Britain and the United States, are prominent among empires that learned how to retrench. At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, British leaders saw that the strategy of "splendid isolation"—what we would now call unilateralism—was getting the empire into trouble. The independence struggle of Boer farmers in South Africa drained the imperial coffers while, at the same time, the European great powers were challenging Britain's naval mastery and its hold on other colonial positions. Quickly doing the math, the British patched up relations with their secondary rivals, France and Russia, to form an alliance directed at the main danger, Germany. Likewise, when the United States blundered into war in Vietnam, it retrenched and adopted a more patient strategy for waiting out its less capable communist opponents.

Contemporary America, too, is capable of anticipating the counterproductive effects of offensive policies and of moderating them before much damage is done. The Bush team, guided by wary public opinion, worked through existing UN res-

olutions during the fall of 2002 to increase multilateral support for its threats of preventative war against Iraq. Moreover, the administration declined to apply mechanically its preventative war principles when North Korea renounced international controls on its nuclear materials in December 2002. Strikingly, too, a December codicil to the NSS, dealing specifically with the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, never mentioned the option of preventative attack.<sup>2</sup> A brief tour through the misguided strategic ideas of previous empires underscores the wisdom of such self-restraint.

### *Myths of Security Through Expansion*

EVERY MAJOR historical instance of imperial overstretch has been propelled by arguments that security could best be achieved through further expansion—"myths of empire", I have called them.<sup>3</sup> Since many of these myths are echoed eerily in the Bush Administration's strategic rhetoric, it is worthwhile recalling how those earlier advocates of imperial overstretch tried to make their dubious cases. Eight themes deserve mention.

#### OFFENSIVE ADVANTAGE

THE MOST general of the myths of empire is that the attacker has an inherent advantage. Sometimes this is explained in terms of the advantages of surprise. More often, it relies on the broader notion that seizing the initiative allows the attacker to impose a plan on a passive enemy and to choose a propitious time and circumstance for the fight. Even if the political objective is self-defense, in this view, attacking is still the best strategy. As the NSS says, "our best defense is a good offense."

Throughout history, strategists who have blundered into imperial overstretch

have shared this view. For example, General Alfred von Schlieffen, the author of Germany's misbegotten plan for a quick, decisive offensive in France in 1914, used to say that "if one is too weak to attack the whole" of the other side's army, "one should attack a section."<sup>4</sup> This idea defies elementary military common sense. In war, the weaker side normally remains on the defensive precisely because defending its home ground is typically easier than attacking the other side's strongholds.

The idea of offensive advantage also runs counter to the most typical patterns of deterrence and coercion. Sometimes the purpose of a military operation is not to take or hold territory but to influence an adversary by inflicting pain. This is especially true when weapons of mass destruction are involved. In that case, war may resemble a competition in the willingness to endure pain. Here too, however, the defender normally has the advantage, because the side defending its own homeland and the survival of its regime typically cares more about the stakes of the conflict than does a would-be attacker. It is difficult to imagine North Korea using nuclear weapons or mounting a conventional artillery barrage on the South Korean capital of Seoul for purposes of conquest, but it is much easier to envision such desperate measures in response to "preventive" U.S. attacks on the core power resources of the regime.

<sup>2</sup>Office of the President, *National Strategy to Combat Weapons of Mass Destruction*, December 2002.

<sup>3</sup>See my *Myths of Empire: Domestic Politics and International Ambition* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991). I used the term "empire" in the general sense of a powerful state that uses force to expand its influence abroad beyond the point at which the costs of expansion begin to rise sharply.

<sup>4</sup>Quoted in my *Ideology of the Offensive: Military Decision Making and the Disasters of 1914* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984), p. 113.

Because the Bush Administration saw such retaliation as feasible and credible, it was deterred from undertaking preventive strikes when the North Koreans unsealed a nuclear reactor in December. Indeed, deterring any country from attacking is almost always easier than compelling it to disarm, surrender territory or change its regime. Once stated, this point seems obvious, but the logic of the Bush strategy document implies the opposite.

#### POWER SHIFTS

ONE REASON that blundering empires have been keen on offensive strategies is that they have relied on preventive attacks to forestall unfavorable shifts in the balance of power. In both World War I and II, for example, Germany's leaders sought war with Russia in the short run because they expected the Russian army to gain relative strength over time.<sup>5</sup> But the tactic backfired badly. Preventive aggression not only turned a possible enemy into a certain one, but in the long run it helped bring other powers into the fight to prevent Germany from gaining hegemony over all of them. This reflects a fundamental realist principle of the balance of power: In the international system, states and other powerful actors tend to form alliances against the expansionist state that most threatens them. Attackers provoke fears that drive their potential victims to cooperate with each other.

Astute strategists learn to anticipate such cooperation and try to use it to their advantage. For example, one of the most successful diplomats in European history, Otto von Bismarck, achieved the unification of Germany by always putting the other side in the wrong and, whenever possible, maneuvering the opponent into attacking first. As a result, Prussia expanded its control over the German lands without provoking excessive fears or resis-

tance. Pressed by his generals on several occasions to authorize preventive attacks, Bismarck said that preventive war is like committing suicide from fear of death; it would "put the full weight of the imponderables . . . on the side of the enemies we have attacked."<sup>6</sup> Instead, he demanded patience: "I have often had to stand for long periods of time in the hunting blind and let myself be covered and stung by insects before the moment came to shoot."<sup>7</sup> Germany fared poorly under Bismarck's less-able successors, who shared his ruthlessness but lacked his understanding of the balance of power.

Because Saddam Hussein attacked Kuwait, the elder Bush enjoyed a diplomatic advantage in the 1991 war. That's why the coalition against Iraq was so large and willing. This advantage is vastly and inherently more difficult to achieve in a strategy of preventive attack, as the younger Bush has learned over the past year. Especially when an adverse power shift is merely hypothetical and not imminent, it hardly seems worthwhile to incur the substantial diplomatic disadvantages of a preventive attack.

#### PAPER TIGER ENEMIES

EMPIRES ALSO become overstretched when they view their enemies as paper tigers, capable of becom-

<sup>5</sup>Dale C. Copeland, *The Origins of Major War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000).

<sup>6</sup>Gordon Craig, *Germany: 1866-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), pp. 24-25; and Gerhard Ritter, *The Sword and the Scepter: The Problem of Militarism in Germany*, vol. 1 (Coral Gables, FL: University of Miami Press, 1969), p. 245, quoting Bismarck's Reichstag speech of February 6, 1888.

<sup>7</sup>Quoted in Otto Pflanze, *Bismarck and the Development of Germany: The Period of Unification, 1815-1871* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1963), p. 90.

ing fiercely threatening if appeased, but easily crumpled by a resolute attack. These images are often not only wrong, but self-contradictory. For example, Japanese militarists saw the United States as so strong and insatiably aggressive that Japan would have to conquer a huge, self-sufficient empire to get the resources to defend itself; yet at the same time, the Japanese regime saw the United States as so vulnerable and irresolute that a sharp rap against Pearl Harbor would discourage it from fighting back.

Similarly, the Bush Administration's arguments for preventive war against Iraq have portrayed Saddam Hussein as being completely undeterrable from using weapons of mass destruction, yet Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld said he expected that Iraq would not use them even if attacked because "wise Iraqis will not obey his orders to use WMD."<sup>8</sup> In other words, administration strategists think that deterrence is impossible even in situations in which Saddam lacks a motive to use weapons of mass destruction, but they think deterrence will succeed when a U.S. attack provides Iraq the strongest imaginable motive to use its weapons. The *NSS* says "the greater the threat, the greater is the risk of inaction"; but this is a rationale for preventive attack only if we accept a paper tiger image of the enemy.

#### BANDWAGONS

**A**NOTHER MYTH of empire is that states tend to jump on the bandwagon with threatening or forceful powers. During the Cold War, for example, the Soviet Union thought that forceful action in Berlin, Cuba and the developing world would demonstrate its political and military strength, encourage so-called progressive forces to ally actively with Moscow, and thereby shift the balance of forces still further in the favor of the communist bloc. The Soviets called

this the "correlation of forces" theory. In fact, the balance of power effect far outweighed and erased the bandwagon effect. The Soviet Union was left far weaker in relative terms as a result of its pressing for unilateral advantage. As Churchill said of the Soviets in the wake of the first Berlin Crisis, "Why have they deliberately acted for three long years so as to unite the free world against them?"<sup>9</sup>

During the 1991 Gulf War, the earlier Bush Administration argued that rolling back Saddam Hussein's conquest of Kuwait was essential to discourage Arabs throughout the Middle East from jumping on the Iraqi bandwagon. Now the current Bush Administration hopes that bandwagon dynamics can be made to work in its own favor. Despite the difficulties that the United States has had in lining up support for an invasion of Iraq, the administration nonetheless asserts that its strategy of preventive war will lead others to jump on the U.S. bandwagon. Secretary Rumsfeld has said that "if our leaders do the right thing, others will follow and support our just cause—just as they have in the global war against terror."<sup>10</sup>

At the same time, some self-styled realists in the administration also argue that their policy is consistent with the concept of the balance of power, but the rhetoric of the *NSS* pulls this concept inside out: "Through our willingness to use force in our own defense and in the defense of others, the United States demonstrates its resolve to maintain a balance of power that favors freedom." What this Orwellian statement really seems to mean is that preventive war will attract a bandwagon of support that creates an

<sup>8</sup>Testimony before the House Armed Services Committee, September 18–9, 2002.

<sup>9</sup>Speech at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, March 31, 1949.

<sup>10</sup>Testimony before the House Armed Services Committee, September 18–9, 2002.

imbalance of power in America's favor, a conception that is logically the same as the wrongheaded Soviet theory of the "correlation of forces." Administration strategists like to use the terminology of the balance of power, but they understand that concept exactly backwards.

#### BIG STICK DIPLOMACY

A CLOSELY RELATED myth is the big stick theory of making friends by threatening them. Before World War I, Germany's leaders found that its rising power and belligerent diplomacy had pushed France, Russia and Britain into a loose alliance against it. In the backwards reasoning of German diplomacy, they decided to try to break apart this encirclement by trumping up a crisis over claims to Morocco, threatening France with an attack and hoping to prove to French leaders that its allies would not come to its rescue. In fact, Britain did support France, and the noose around Germany grew tighter.

How does the United States today seek to win friends abroad? The NSS offers some reassuring language about the need to work with allies. Unlike President Bill Clinton in the Kosovo war, President Bush worked very hard for a UN resolution to authorize an attack on Iraq. Nonetheless, on the Iraq issue and a series of others, the administration has extorted cooperation primarily by threats to act unilaterally, not gained it by persuasion or concessions. Russia was forced to accept a new strategic arms control regime on take-it-or-leave-it American terms. EU member states were similarly compelled to accept an exemption for U.S. officials from prosecution by the International Criminal Court. Germany was snubbed for resisting the war against Iraq. Multilateral initiatives on the environment were summarily rejected. Secretary Rumsfeld, in his personal jottings on

strategy, has raised to the level of principle the dictum that the United States should "avoid trying so hard to persuade others to join a coalition that we compromise on our goals."<sup>11</sup> Either the administration believes allies are dispensable, or a powerful faction within it adheres to the Kaiser Wilhelm theory of diplomacy.

#### FALLING DOMINOES

A NOTHER COMMON myth of empire is the famous domino theory. According to this conception, small setbacks at the periphery of the empire will tend to snowball into an unstoppable chain of defeats that will ultimately threaten the imperial core. Consequently, empires must fight hard to prevent even the most trivial setbacks. Various causal mechanisms are imagined that might trigger such cascades: The opponent will seize ever more strategic resources from these victories, tipping the balance of forces and making further conquests easier. Vulnerable defenders will lose heart. Allies and enemies alike will come to doubt the empire's resolve to fight for its commitments. An empire's domestic political support will be undermined. Above all, lost credibility is the ultimate domino.

Such reasoning has been nearly universal among overstretched empires.<sup>12</sup> For example, in 1898 the British and the French both believed that if a French scouting party could claim a tributary of the Upper Nile—at a place called Fashoda—France could build a dam there, block the flow of the Nile, trigger chaos in Egypt that would force Britain out of the Suez Canal, cut Britain's strategic lifeline to India, and thus topple the empire that depended on India's wealth and manpower.

<sup>11</sup>Rumsfeld quoted in the *New York Times*, October 4, 2002.

<sup>12</sup>See Charles Kupchan, *The Vulnerability of Empire* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994).

er. Britain and France, both democracies, nearly went to war because of this chimera. Similarly, Cold War America believed that if Vietnam fell to communism, then the credibility of its commitment to defend Taiwan, Japan and Berlin would be debased. Arguably, the peripheral setback in Vietnam tarnished American deterrent credibility only because we so often and so insistently said it would.

Similar arguments, especially ones that hinge on lost credibility, have informed Secretary Rumsfeld's brief for preventive war against Iraq. In a nice rhetorical move, he quoted former President Clinton to the effect that if "we fail to act" against Saddam's non-compliance with inspections,

he will conclude that the international community has lost its will. He will conclude that he can go right on and do more to rebuild an arsenal of devastating destruction. . . . Some day, some way, I guarantee you he will use that arsenal.<sup>13</sup>

Rumsfeld could have added (but didn't) that the Clinton Administration made the same argument even more strongly about the dire precedent that would be set by permitting the further expansion of North Korea's nuclear weapons capability. Ironically, the credibility of the United States is on the line in such cases mainly because of its own rhetoric.

And yet it may be that the threat of an American attack is all *too* credible. The main motivation for North Korea to break out of the 1994 agreement constraining its nuclear program was apparently its perceived need, in light of the Bush Administration's preventive war doctrine and reluctance to negotiate, for more powerful weapons to deter the United States.

A ubiquitous corollary of the domino theory holds that it is cheap and easy to stop aggressors if it is done early on.

Secretary Rumsfeld has made this kind of argument to justify a preventive attack on Iraq. Between 35 and 60 million people died needlessly, he claimed, because the world didn't attack Hitler preventively: "He might have been stopped early—at minimal cost in lives—had the vast majority of the world's leaders not decided at the time that the risks of acting were greater than the risks of not acting." Apart from its questionable relevance to the case of Iraq, the historical point is itself debatable: Britain and France were militarily ill-prepared to launch a preventive attack at the time of the Munich crisis, and if they had, they probably would have had to fight Germany without the Soviet Union and the United States as allies. As Bismarck had understood, preventive war is bad strategy in part because it often leads to diplomatic isolation.

EL DORADO  
AND MANIFEST DESTINY

**M**OST OF the central myths of empire focus on a comparison of the alleged costs of offensive versus defensive strategies. In addition, myths that exaggerate the benefits of imperial expansion sometimes play an important role in strategic debates. For example, German imperialism before World War I was fueled in part by the false idea that Central Africa would be an El Dorado of resources that would strengthen Germany's strategic position in the same way that India had supposedly strengthened Britain's. In debates about preventive war in Iraq, some commentators have portrayed an anticipated oil windfall as a comparable El Dorado. Astutely, the Bush Administration has refrained from rhetoric about this potential boon, realiz-

<sup>13</sup>Clinton quoted by Rumsfeld, Testimony before the House Armed Services Committee, September 18–9, 2002.

ing that it would be counterproductive and unnecessary to dwell on it. Such a windfall could turn out to be a curse in any event, since pumping massive amounts of oil to pay for an occupation of Iraq could undercut Saudi oil revenues and destabilize the political system there.

Sometimes the promised benefits of imperial expansion are also ideological—for example, France's civilizing mission or America's mission to make the world safe for democracy. In a surprising moment of candor, John Foster Dulles, a decade before he became Dwight Eisenhower's Secretary of State, wrote that all empires had been "imbued with and radiated great faiths [like] Manifest Destiny [and] The White Man's Burden." We Americans "need a faith", said Dulles, "that will make us strong, a faith so pronounced that we, too, will feel that we have a mission to spread throughout the world."<sup>14</sup> An idealistic goal is patently invoked here for its instrumental value in mobilizing support for the imperial enterprise.

The idealistic notes that grace the Bush Administration's strategy paper have the same hollow ring. The document is chock full of high-sounding prose about the goal of spreading democracy to Iraq and other countries living under the yoke of repression. President Bush's preface to the strategy document asserts that "the United States enjoys a position of unparalleled military strength", which creates "a moment of opportunity to extend the benefits of freedom across the globe. We will actively work to bring the hope of democracy, development, free markets, and free trade to every corner of the world." This sounds like insincere public relations in light of candidate Bush's warnings against the temptations of nation-building abroad. The theme of promoting democracy is rare in Secretary Rumsfeld's statements, which may turn out to be a better index of the administration's underlying views.

## NO TRADEOFFS

A FINAL MYTH of empire is that in strategy there are no tradeoffs. Proponents of imperial expansion tend to pile on every argument from the whole list of myths of empire. It is not enough to argue that the opponent is a paper tiger, or that dominoes tend to fall, or that big stick diplomacy will make friends, or that a preventive attack will help to civilize the natives. Rather, proponents of offensive self-defense inhabit a rhetorical world in which *all* of these things are simultaneously true, and thus all considerations point in the same direction.

The Bush Administration's strategic rhetoric about Iraq in late 2002 did not disappoint in this regard. Saddam was portrayed as undeterrable, as getting nuclear weapons unless deposed and giving them to terrorists, the war against him would be cheap and easy, grumbling allies would jump on our bandwagon, Iraq would become a democracy, and the Arab street would thank the United States for liberating it. In real life, as opposed to the world of imperial rhetoric, it is surprising when every conceivable consideration supports the preferred strategy. As is so often the case with the myths of empire, this piling on of reinforcing claims smacks of *ex post facto* justification rather than serious strategic assessment.

During the 2000 presidential campaign, Condoleezza Rice wrote of Iraq that "the first line of defense should be a clear and classical statement of deterrence—if they do acquire WMD, their weapons will be unusable because any attempt to use them will bring national obliteration."<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup>"A Righteous Faith for a Just and Durable Peace", October 1942, Dulles Papers, quoted in Ronald Pruessen, *John Foster Dulles: The Road to Power* (New York: Free Press, 1982), p. 200.

<sup>15</sup>Rice, "Promoting the National Interest", *Foreign Affairs* (January/February 2000), p. 61.

Two years later, however, the possibility of deterrence has become unthinkable as administration rhetoric regarding Iraq has been piled higher and higher. "Given the goals of rogue states [and] the inability to deter a potential attacker" of this kind, says the NSS, "we cannot let our enemies strike first." Administration dogma left no room for any assessment of Iraq that did not reinforce the logic of the prevailing preventive strategy.

### *Why Are Myths of Empire So Prevalent?*

**I**N AMERICA today, strategic experts abound. Many are self-styled realists, people who pride themselves on accepting the hard reality that the use of force is often necessary in the defense of national interests. It is striking that many of these realists consider the Bush Administration's strategic justifications for preventive war against Iraq to be unconvincing. Indeed, 32 prominent international relations scholars, most of them realists, bought an ad in the *New York Times* to make their case against the Bush strategy. Included among them was the leading proponent of the "offensive realism" school of thought, John Mearsheimer, a professor at the University of Chicago.<sup>16</sup>

Proponents of the new preventive strategy charge that such realists are out of touch with a world in which forming alliances to balance against overwhelming U.S. power has simply become impossible. It is true that small rogue states and their ilk cannot on their own offset American power in the traditional sense. It is also true that their potential great-power backers, Russia and China, have so far been wary of overtly opposing U.S. military interventions. But even if America's unprecedented power reduces the likelihood of traditional balancing alliances arising against it, the United States could find that its own offensive

actions create their functional equivalents. Some earlier expansionist empires found themselves overstretched and surrounded by enemies even though balancing alliances were slow to oppose them. For example, although the prospective victims of Napoleon and Hitler found it difficult to form effective balancing coalitions, these empires attacked so many opponents simultaneously that substantial *de facto* alliances eventually did form against them. Today, an analogous form of self-imposed overstretch—political as well as military—could occur if the need for military operations to prevent nuclear proliferation risks were deemed urgent on several fronts at the same time, or if an attempt to impose democracy by force of arms on a score or more of Muslim countries were seriously undertaken.

Even in the absence of highly coordinated balancing alliances, simultaneous resistance by several troublemaking states and terrorist groups would be a daunting challenge for a strategy of universal preventive action. Highly motivated small powers or rebel movements defending their home ground have often prevailed against vastly superior states that lacked the sustained motivation to dominate them at extremely high cost, as in Vietnam and Algeria. Even when they do not prevail, as on the West Bank, they may fight on, imposing high costs over long periods.

Precisely because America is so strong, weak states on America's hit list may increasingly conclude that weapons of mass destruction joined to terror tactics are the only feasible equalizer to its power. Despite America's aggregate power advantages, weaker opponents can get access to outside resources to sustain this kind of cost-imposing resistance.

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<sup>16</sup>*New York Times*, September 26, 2002. See also John J. Mearsheimer, "Hearts and Minds", *The National Interest* (Fall 2002), p. 15.

Even a state as weak and isolated as North Korea has been able to mount a credible deterrent, in part by engaging in mutually valuable strategic trade with Pakistan and other Middle Eastern states. The Bush Administration itself stresses that Iraq bought components for the production of weapons of mass destruction on the commercial market and fears that no embargo can stop this. Iran is buying a nuclear reactor from Russia that the United States views as posing risks of nuclear proliferation. Palestinian suicide bombers successfully impose severe costs with minimal resources. In the September 11 attack, Al-Qaeda famously used its enemy's own resources.

In short, both historically and today, it seems hard to explain the prevalence of the myths of empire in terms of objective strategic analysis. So what, then, explains it?

In some historical cases, narrow interest groups that profited from imperial expansion or military preparations hijacked strategic debates by controlling the media or bankrolling imperial pressure groups. In imperial Japan, for example, when a civilian strategic planning board pointed out the implausibilities and contradictions in the militarists' worldview, its experts were thanked for their trenchant analysis and then summarily fired. In pre-World War I Germany, internal documents showing the gaping holes in the offensive strategic plans of the army and navy were kept secret, and civilians lacked the information or expertise to criticize the military's public reasoning. The directors of Krupp Steelworks subsidized the belligerent German Navy League before 1914, and then in the 1920s monopolized the wire services that brought nationalist-slanted news to Germany's smaller cities and towns. These were precisely the constituencies that later voted most heavily for Hitler.

In other cases, myths of empire were

propounded by hard-pressed leaders seeking to rally support by pointing a finger at real or imagined enemies. For example, in the aftermath of the French Revolution, a series of unstable regimes found that they could increase their short-run popularity by exaggerating the threat from monarchical neighboring states and from aristocratic traitors to the Revolution. Napoleon perfected this strategy of rule, transforming the republic of the Rights of Man into an ever-expanding empire of popular nationalism.

Once the myths of empire gain widespread currency in a society, their origins in political expediency are often forgotten. Members of the second generation become true believers in the domino theory, big stick diplomacy and the civilizing mission. Kaiser Wilhelm's ministers were self-aware manipulators, but their audiences, including the generation that formed the Nazi movement, believed in German nationalist ideology with utmost conviction. In a process that Stephen Van Evera has called "blowback", the myths of empire may become ingrained in the psyche of the people and the institutions of their state.

Many skeptics about attacking Iraq suspect that similar domestic political dynamics are at the root of the Bush doctrine of preventive war. In particular, they think that the Iraq project echoes the plot of recent fictions in which a foreign war is trumped up to win an election. Some suggested that the day after the November 2002 election, the drumbeat of war would miraculously slacken and then disappear. Such rank cynicism deserved to be disappointed, and it was. Some members of Bush's inner circle have been spoiling for a rematch with Iraq for years, so clearly the convergence of its timing with the mid-term congressional election was a coincidence. Nonetheless, it probably did not hurt the hawks' cause in White House deliberations that the Iraq issue succeeded

in pushing the parlous state of the economy off the front pages at a convenient moment.

A deeper reason for the prevalence of the myths of empire in contemporary debates is the legacy of Cold War rhetoric in the tropes of American strategic discourse. The Rumsfeld generation grew to political maturity inculcated with the Munich analogy and the domino theory. It is true that an opposite metaphor, the quagmire, is readily available for skeptics to invoke as a result of the Vietnam experience. But after the September 11 attack and the easy victory over the Taliban, the American political audience is primed for Munich analogies and preventive war, not for quagmire theories. Indeed, it is striking how many Senate speeches on the resolution authorizing the use of force in Iraq began with references to the effect of September 11 on the American psyche. They did not necessarily argue that the Iraqi government is a terrorist organization like Al-Qaeda. They simply noted the emotional reality that the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon had left Americans fearful and ready to fight back forcefully against threats of many sorts. In this sense, America is psychologically primed to accept the myths of empire. They "feel right"; but this is no way to run a grand strategy.

A final reason why America is primed to accept the myths of empire is simply the temptation of great power. As the German realist historian Ludwig Dehio wrote about Germany's bid for a hegemonic position in Europe, "since the supreme power stands in the solitude of its supremacy, it must face daemonic temptations of a special kind."<sup>17</sup> More recently, Christopher Layne has chronicled the tendency of unipolar hegemonic states since the Spain of Philip II to succumb to the temptations of overstretch and thereby to provoke the enmity of an opposing coalition.<sup>18</sup> Today, the United

States is so strong compared to everyone else that almost any imaginable military objective may seem achievable. This circumstance, supercharged by the rhetoric of the myths of empire, makes the temptation of preventive war almost irresistible.

THE HISTORICAL record warrants a skeptical attitude toward arguments that security can be achieved through imperial expansion and preventive war. Moving beyond mere skepticism, we may consider a general prescription, one that might resonate with both liberals and realists alike.

Liberals might want to review a recent book by G. John Ikenberry, *After Victory*, which tells the story of attempts by the victors in global power contests to establish a stable post-conflict international order.<sup>19</sup> Ikenberry shows that democracies are particularly well suited to succeed in this because the transparency of their political institutions makes them trustworthy bargaining partners in the eyes of weaker states. As a result, strong and weak states are able to commit themselves to an international constitution that serves the interests of both. Realists should study this book, too, because it explains why even the strongest of powers has an incentive to lead through consensus rather than raw coercion.

#### President Bush's National Security

<sup>17</sup>Dehio, *Germany and World Politics in the Twentieth Century* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1967 [1959]), p. 15.

<sup>18</sup>Layne, "The Unipolar Illusion: Why New Powers Will Rise", *International Security* (Spring 1993).

<sup>19</sup>See Ikenberry, *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order After Major Wars* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000); and Ikenberry, "Getting Hegemony Right", *The National Interest* (Spring 2001).

Advisor, former Stanford political science professor and provost Condoleezza Rice, has recently advanced a much different view of the interplay of power-political realism and democratic idealism. (Once you have been a professor of international relations, it is evidently hard to get these debates out of your blood.) She argues that realism and idealism should not be seen as alternatives: a realistic sense of power politics should be used in the service of ideals. Who could possibly disagree? But contrary to what she and Bush once argued on the campaign trail about humility and a judicious sense of limits, Rice now believes that America's vast military power should be used preventively to spread democratic ideals. She has also

said, speaking in New York this past October, that the aim of the Bush strategy is "to dissuade any potential adversary from pursuing a military build-up in the hope of surpassing, or equaling, the power of the United States and our allies." Today, no combination of adversaries can hope to equal America's power under any circumstances. However, if they fear the unbridled use of America's power, they may perceive overwhelming incentives to wield weapons of terror and mass destruction to deter America's offensive tactics of self-defense. Indeed, the history of the myths of empire suggests that a general strategy of preventive war is likely to bring about precisely the outcome that Bush and Rice wish to avert. □

### *Of Empire, Power Balances and Preventive War*

To speak now of the true temper of empire, it is a thing rare and hard to keep; for both temper, and distemper, consist of contraries. . . . The difficulties in princes' business are many and great; but the greatest difficulty, is often in their own mind. For it is common with princes (saith Tacitus) to will contradictories, *Sunt plerumque regum voluntates vehementes, et inter se contrariae*. For it is the solecism of power, to think to command the end, and yet not to endure the mean. . . .

For their neighbors; there can no general rule be given (for occasions are so variable), save one, which ever holdeth, which is, that princes do keep due sentinel, that none of their neighbors do ever grow so (by increase of territory, by embracing of trade, by approaches, or the like), as they become more able to annoy them, than they were. And this is generally the work of standing counsels, to foresee and to hinder it. During that triumvirate of kings, King Henry the Eighth of England, Francis the First King of France, and Charles the Fifth Emperor, there was such a watch kept, that none of the three could win a palm of ground, but the other two would straightways balance it, either by confederation, or, if need were, by a war; and would not in any wise take up peace at interest. . . .

Neither is the opinion of some of the Schoolmen, to be received, *that a war cannot justly be made, but upon a precedent injury or provocation*. For there is no question, but a just fear of an imminent danger, though there be no blow given, is a lawful cause of a war. . . .

—Francis Bacon