

## AN UNEXCEPTIONAL EMPIRE: THE UNITED STATES IN THE PERSIAN GULF

Marc J. O'Reilly\*

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“America is a Nation with a mission –and that mission comes from our most basic beliefs. We have no desire to dominate, no ambitions of empire. Our aim is a democratic peace– a peace founded upon the dignity and rights of every man and woman. America acts in this cause with friends and allies at our side, yet we understand our special calling: This great Republic will lead the cause of freedom”

George W. Bush (2004)<sup>1</sup>

“It is certain that the rest of the world will continue to think of us [the United States] as an empire. Foreigners pay little attention to what we say. They observe what we do. We on the other hand think of what we feel. And the result is that we go on creating what mankind calls an empire while we continue to believe quite sincerely that it is not an empire because it does not feel to us the way we imagine an empire ought to feel”

Walter Lippmann (1927)<sup>2</sup>

In September 2004, scholar Ronald Steel wrote: “The United States today is what it is, and has been at least since 1945: a great imperial power

with global interests to protect and advance”. Two years’ worth of bloody conflict in Iraq and Afghanistan have only reinforced Steel’s blunt assessment, yet many Americans still do not acknowledge this sobering reality. For them, a U.S. empire, whether in the Persian Gulf or anywhere else, does not exist. They consider their country an exceptional Great Power, whose anti-imperialist values foreigners should admire and assimilate<sup>3</sup>.

Faithful to this Wilsonian credo, President George W. Bush, whose father promoted multilateral internationalism while U.S. head of state, sought to perpetuate this national philosophy upon entering the Oval Office in January 2001. Staffed with veterans of the Ford, Reagan, and his dad’s administration, his presidency promised a “humble” stewardship that could inspire the world. But rather than lead, Bush dictated. Such arrogance allowed Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle (D-South Dakota) and other critics to chastise the White House for its isolationism and unilateralism.

The appalling events of September 11, 2001, muted Congressional criticism of the Bush administration’s foreign policy and prompted the president to spearhead an international anti-terrorism coalition. As a result of the horror visited upon the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, the White House continued to impose its pre-9/11 preferences. Bush underscored this stratagem whenever he

\* Department of Political Science & Anthropology, Heidelberg College. E-mail: moreilly@heidelberg.edu.

<sup>1</sup> “Text of Bush’s Speech”. *The New York Times*, 20 January 2004.

<sup>2</sup> Lippmann, Walter, *Men of Destiny*. New York, Macmillan, 1927, 217.

<sup>3</sup> Steel, Ronald, “Totem and Taboo”. *The Nation*, 20 September 2004.

repeated his “You are either with the United States or against it” ultimatum to the world.

Washington’s refusal to consult meaningfully with other governments in the months before 9/11 and its pro forma consultations afterward flowed from America’s redoubtable global stature. Starting with World War II, U.S. power increased exponentially until the Vietnam War halted its expansion. After an era of “relative decline”, the United States recovered spectacularly once the Cold War ended. During the 1990s, the nation’s economy boomed, thanks to improved efficiencies and electronic commerce; the Pentagon married new technologies to revised military doctrine; and countries everywhere embraced American market capitalism. Although the U.S. economy stalled in 2001 amidst criticism at home and abroad of the inequities of American liberalism, no nation could rival the United States. With immense reserves of “soft power” to complement its wealth and martial prowess, Washington could thus claim the title of overlord once held by Pericles’ Athens, Rome under the Caesars, Napoleonic France, and Victorian England.

As America rose to “hyperpower” status in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it rarely portrayed itself as an imperium. As a liberal state, it usually disdained British and French atavism. In a post-1945 era of worldwide emancipation, Americans confined the words of Rudyard Kipling to the dungeon of vulgarity, even though their country remained segregated until the 1960s. The United States cloaked its considerable geopolitical ambition in words that reassured rather than threatened. It called itself a superpower or hegemon, terms that inspired neither the hatred nor trepidation associated with empire. Sanguine presidents spoke of a world community that America would gratify, not plunder. With generosity as their mantra, Americans conceived of themselves as citizens of a selfless country that could endear itself to everyone who recognized the universality of its national values. Washington would

lead out of duty to the international community; others would follow willingly. This legitimization of its world role positioned the United States as an anti-imperialist Great Power. To reinforce this notion, Americans invented and promoted terminology that connoted improvement for all rather than simply self-promotion.

Abroad, however, the juxtaposition of its paternalistic intentions with certain infelicitous acts since the 1898 Spanish-American War earned Washington the title of “liberal imperialist”, especially in the so-called developing world. The foreign perception of the United States as a hypocritical bully eagerly imposing its wishes on other nations, while refusing any checks on its power, continued to pervade many countries in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. Leaders such as Venezuela’s Hugo Chavez and Iran’s Mahmoud Ahmadinejad underscored America’s eroding legitimacy internationally when they decried what they perceived as the U.S. imperium’s various injustices. As well, Harvard’s Stephen Walt detailed the many ways countries sought to “tame” the United States. Still, despite a multitude of foreign-policy transgressions throughout American history, the U.S. imperial style did not typically humiliate friends and foes alike. *The New Yorker’s* Joshua Marshall epitomized this habit when he wrote: “[i]f America, militarily unchallenged and economically dominant, indeed took on the functions of imperial governance, its empire was, for the most part, loose and consensual”<sup>4</sup>.

As the United States found itself in many respects *between empire and post-empire*, its foreign policy, especially following the end of the Cold War, took on both a liminal and amalgamated quality. Efforts to blend liberalism and realism typically resulted, however, in policy incoherence. To remedy that, George W. Bush’s administration, which faulted its predecessor for its indecisiveness, pursued so-called maximalist policies, which American presidents, including Bill Clinton, had advocated since the Reagan years, even though those

<sup>4</sup> Walt, Stephen M., *Taming American Power: The Global Response to U.S. Primacy*. New York, W.W. Norton & Company, 2005 and Marshall, Joshua Micah, “Power Rangers: Did the Bush Administration Create a New American Empire – or Weaken the Old One?”. *The New Yorker*, 2 February 2004. On U.S. problems with the developing world, see Newsom, David D., *The Imperial Mantle: The United States, Decolonization, and the Third World*. Bloomington, IN, Indiana University Press, 2001. On foreign disdain for U.S. policies, see Kessler, Glenn, “Anger at U.S. Policies More Strident at U.N.”. *The Washington Post*, 24 September 2006. In a column in *The New Republic* spotlighting Chavez’s and Ahmadinejad’s criticisms of American policy, Peter Beinart wrote that “unless freedom imposes restraints on the United States as well as other nations, it will sound to many in the postcolonial world like domination.” See Beinart, Peter, “Free For All”. *The New Republic*, 9 October 2006, 6.

policies often irritated allies. The White House's tendency, under W. Bush, to offend other countries, whether pro- or anti-American, earned it sustained foreign enmity, more so than any administration in U.S. history. Neo-conservatives, who combined Wilsonian and Reaganesque idealism with a penchant for militarism, dismissed criticism of U.S. foreign policy, especially that emanating from the French, Germans, and other Europeans, as petty envy of American power. Proponents of an internationalized, 21<sup>st</sup> century U.S. manifest destiny advocated overt imperialism in lieu of the "covert empire" painstakingly constructed by Bush's predecessors<sup>5</sup>.

America's global imperium, a product of capitalism and military exertion, remade the world. Commerce and bases effected an "American Century", a designation that connoted both achievement and awe as well as bewilderment and destruction. Those outcomes have co-existed none more tenuously than in the Persian Gulf, a region Washington entered without knowing its political and social-cultural dynamic. Despite lacking such critical information, U.S. policymakers understood that Gulf oil –ample and easily and affordably extractable– rendered the area invaluable both geopolitically and –economically.

To secure that prize, the United States, recklessly or not, fashioned an *informal* empire in the Persian Gulf starting in 1941. This imperium qualified as either neo-classical and/or liberal-classical. Similar to empires such as Athens and Rome, it relied on economic and martial prowess to achieve its geopolitical and –economic objectives. Like those imperia, it coerced as well as co-opted its friends and enemies in the region. Unlike such empires, however, the United States refrained from occupying Gulf territory, other than via bases, until *Operation Iraqi Freedom* in 2003. It thus never even tried to colonize the states within its Gulf sphere of influence.

Seeking imperial influence in the era of decolonization that followed World War II, the United

States eschewed the modalities of traditional empire in favor of a post-colonial imperium in the Gulf that, quickly or belatedly, adjusted to various regional upheavals. Accordingly, the boundaries of America's Gulf empire shifted over the years and decades – a very common characteristic of empires, which usually expand and contract based on military, economic, diplomatic, and administrative performance as well as events within the imperium. Middle East expert Fouad Ajami noted that America's "imperial acquisition came through the usual mix of default and design, by the push of [U.S.] interests, and by the furtive invitations extended to distant powers by worlds in need of an outside arbiter". In 1997, several years before George W. Bush ordered an invasion of Iraq and spoke of a Wilsonian project to democratize the Greater Middle East, analyst Adam Garfinkle observed that "what the United States is doing in [the Middle East], particularly in the Persian Gulf, is best described as imperial: Washington aims to stabilize the region even if it must use force to do so (as it has proven in the past). And the confessed reasons are neither transcendent nor sentimental, but cold-bloodedly strategic"<sup>6</sup>.

To build and sustain its empire in the Persian Gulf, the United States relied on various forms of contingent, or situational, imperialism: alliance, proxy, and unilateral. These strategies of imperialism typically allowed Washington to respond intermittently, rather than continuously or reflexively, to events in the region; usually permitted calibration of ends and means; and facilitated policy innovation whenever U.S. influence waned in the region. These flexible strategies rarely ensured optimal outcomes – informal empires should not expect such results given their purposeful inattention to daily events within their imperia – but they assured America's continued relevance within the Persian Gulf. As Washington became more aware of the area's geoeconomic and –strategic importance during the Cold War, U.S. policymakers made countless decisions – spanning several decades and

<sup>5</sup> Stephen Sestanovich, "American Maximalism". *The National Interest*, 79 (Spring 2005), 13-23; Marshall, Joshua Micah, "Power Rangers...", op. cit. For foreigners' views of U.S. foreign policy, see Pew Research Center for the People & the Press. "Pew Global Attitudes Project: 23 June 2005 Survey: American Character Gets Mixed Reviews" [document online] Available from Internet at: <<http://people-press.org/reports>>. For Americans' infatuation with militarism, see Bacevich, Andrew J., *The New American Militarism: How Americans Are Seduced by War*. New York, Oxford University Press, 2005.

<sup>6</sup> Ajami, Fouad, "Where U.S. Power Is Beside the Point". *The New York Times*, 17 October 2000 and Garfinkle, Adam, "The U.S. Imperial Postulate in the Mideast". *Orbis*, XLI-1 (Winter 1997), 16.

involving important corporate leaders – that eventually resulted in the establishment of an American empire in the Persian Gulf. While neither President Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1941, nor his successors, aimed to create such an imperium, absence of purpose does not make that empire inexistent. America may claim a lack of imperial zeal – a dubious assertion given the country's various expansionist phases – but its actions in the Persian Gulf, and elsewhere, rival those of past imperialists.

Before it entered the Second World War, the United States cared mostly for the Persian Gulf's oil. On political and military issues, it remained essentially a spectator. The war and its aftermath, which constituted the *first* stage (1941-47) of U.S. expansion in the Gulf, transformed America into an interested Great Power. Washington relied on alliance and proxy imperialism, as it followed the British lead in supplying the Soviets with war matériel and encouraged Iran to resist Soviet pressure. In the *second* stage (1948-58), the White House reverted to alliance imperialism when it helped overthrow Iranian leader Mohammed Mossadeq and stemmed Anglo-French revanchism during the Suez crisis. With the Eisenhower Doctrine, the United States exercised unilateral imperialism. In the *third* stage (1959-72), Washington preferred alliance imperialism in the Kuwaiti crisis, while opting for the proxy variant during the Yemeni War. Richard Nixon's Twin Pillars policy constituted more of the latter. In the *fourth* stage (1973-89), Uncle Sam turned to unilateral imperialism during the initial Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) crisis. Surprisingly, the country refrained from any contingent imperialism during the Iran crisis, but returned to alliance imperialism during the Iran-Iraq War. In the *fifth* stage (1990-2000), America selected the alliance variant on three occasions: to prosecute the Gulf War, contain Iraq after *Operation Desert Storm*, and aid the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states with their security. Washington also reprised unilateral imperialism to punish Iran. In the *sixth* stage (2001-2006), the United States opted for alliance imperialism, as it orchestrated

and led an invasion of Iraq that ousted Saddam Hussein and his cronies. To prevent Iranian nuclear proliferation, the White House drew once more upon alliance imperialism. In this case, however, George W. Bush's administration fulfilled a secondary, or supportive, role, as it watched the United Kingdom, France, and Germany vigorously pursue a diplomatic solution. In the Arab Gulf, Washington implemented alliance imperialism: the GCC countries provided America with bases while the latter guaranteed the former's security.

America's occupation of Iraq added a *formal* component to the U.S. empire in the Persian Gulf, belying Uncle Sam's self-proclaimed anti-imperialism. President Bush, the not-so-quiet American, insisted, however, that the United States had merely sought to liberate Iraqis from a despotic leader, Saddam Hussein, rather than dominate and exploit Iraq, as a true imperium would. As the epigraphs at the outset of this article make plain, President Bush, in Walter Lippmann's words, did not know how empire should "feel". But the objects of American policy – the Iraqis – did, thus rendering the U.S. endeavor, no matter how nobly conceived, imperial. Disseminating "freedom", however a president defines such a malleable concept, may seem selfless and righteous to Americans, but such a *mission civilisatrice*, like others before it (French or otherwise), smacks of self-righteousness – a proud tradition of imperialists for millennia, not something George W. Bush invented<sup>7</sup>.

Before the American-led invasion of Iraq, the Bush administration had envisaged an ephemeral occupation that would allow Washington to sanction a pro-American government that would approve of a dozen or so U.S. bases within Iraq as well as support American policy in the Gulf. But events and U.S. incompetence conspired to thwart the White House's fervent wish, thus making it impossible for the United States to exercise *informal* empire in Iraq, its preferred modus operandi, unless the Bush administration were to overthrow the current Iraqi government – which it helped create – and replace it with a favored authoritarian

<sup>7</sup> For the classic tale of American imperial *naïveté*, involving the U.S. role in Vietnam in the 1950s, see Greene, Graham, *The Quiet American*. New York, Penguin Classics, 2004. For an application to the Iraq War, see Kaplan, Lawrence F., "Quiet American II". *The New Republic*, 1 August 2005. In his book on American involvement in Iraq, *The Foreigner's Gift*, Fouad Ajami refers to the venture as possibly a "noble failure", a characterization consistent with his imperial analysis of U.S. policy in Iraq. See Brown, L. Carl, "The Dream Palace of the Empire". *Foreign Affairs*, LXXXV-5 (September/October 2006), 144-148.

who could serve as America's cat's paw. Such a maneuver would likely remind Middle Easterners of the 1953 Iran coup d'état and other perceived U.S. misdeeds. Most worrisome for Washington, such illegalities would surely exacerbate the rampant anti-Americanism permeating the Greater Middle East. Regardless of how the United States will seek to eliminate threats to U.S. interests in the Persian Gulf, American policy, dubbed "democratic globalism" by Charles Krauthammer, will undoubtedly continue to dissatisfy many Arabs and Persians, while satisfying some groups and individuals, such as the Kurds and various elites in the Gulf monarchies, who *have* benefited from U.S. imperialism, to say nothing of the commercial, political, and bureaucratic gains made by an assortment of American companies, politicians, and institutions over several decades<sup>8</sup>.

As the Bush administration considers how best to secure U.S. goals in Iraq and elsewhere in the Persian Gulf, it will surely draw upon past American policies. Since 1941, the United States has alternated strategies of imperialism while evolving its empire in the Gulf. Initially, Washington favored, but did not necessarily employ, alliance imperialism. In the 1970s and 1980s, presidents touted the proxy variant. In its first term, the current administration rhetorically preferred unilateral imperialism, since ideologically it accorded with its pre-9/11 worldview and the 2002 Bush Doctrine of preemption/prevention. Despite such

a proclivity, the White House considered alliance imperialism more apropos when deciding American policy in the Persian Gulf. Many cynics scoffed at this decision, however, considering it merely an exercise in public relations rather than a serious effort to recruit partners. For critics, the United States exercised unilateral imperialism when it invaded Iraq in March 2003: Washington made a decision and a few other countries followed, especially Great Britain. Calling that alliance imperialism distorted the fundamental inequality of decision-making input between America and its "coalition of the willing". Notwithstanding such taxonomy issues, U.S. policy in the Persian Gulf will remain controversial, and continue to exercise partisans, pundits, scholars, and analysts, whether the White House seeks multilateral solutions to improve its global reputation, downplay its imperial doings, or to assuage Americans, especially Democrats, who disapprove of their country's brash unilateralism<sup>9</sup>.

Whatever the partisan fervor and administration motives may have been in any of the six stages of U.S. expansion in the Persian Gulf, Washington's choice of imperial strategy typically reflected American strength, the regional context, and the opportunity afforded the country to effect its preferred outcome. This progression from alliance, to proxy, to unilateral imperialism correlated with increased U.S. influence within the Gulf and the country's development into an "überpower" following the end of the Cold War<sup>10</sup>.

<sup>8</sup> On the Bush administration's Iraq policy, see Packer, George, *The Assassins' Gate: America in Iraq*. New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005. On U.S., especially Bush administration, incompetence in Iraq, see Danner, Mark, "Iraq: The War of the Imagination". *The New York Review of Books*, 21 December 2006, 81-96; Rich, Frank, "So You Call This Breaking News?". *The New York Times*, 1 October 2006 and Kakutani, Michiko, "A Portrait of Bush as a Victim of His Own Certitude". *The New York Times*, 30 September 2006. On America's quest for informal empire in Iraq, see Dyer, Gwynne, "Iraqis Feeling the Referendum Blues". *The Blade* (Toledo), 10 October 2005, A9. On anti-Americanism, see Hussain, S. Amjad, "Anti-American Views Easy to Understand". *The Blade* (Toledo), 10 October 2005, A9. On America's occupation of Iraq and its problems, see Marr, Phebe "Occupational Hazards: Washington's Record in Iraq". *Foreign Affairs*, LXXXIV-4 (July/August 2005), 180-186. On "democratic globalism", see Krauthammer, Charles. 10 February 2004. "Democratic Realism: An American Foreign Policy for a Unipolar World" (2004 Irving Kristol Lecture delivered at the American Enterprise Institute Annual Dinner, Washington, D.C.) [document online] Available from Internet at: <<http://www.aei.org>>. In his speech, Krauthammer advocated "democratic realism", which, unlike the Bush administration's expansive doctrine of liberty, "must be targeted, focused and limited".

<sup>9</sup> On the situation in Iraq and the future of U.S. policy vis-à-vis that country, see the 27 November & 4 December 2006, special issue of *The New Republic*, titled "Iraq: What Next?". See also Kamp, Nina; O'Hanlon, Michael, and Unikewicz, Amy, "The State of Iraq: An Update". *The New York Times*, 1 October 2006; "Facing Facts on Iraq". *The New York Times*, 24 September 2006 and Diamond, Larry et al., "What to Do in Iraq: A Roundtable". *Foreign Affairs*, LXXXV-4 (July/August 2006), 150-169. On U.S. public opinion and American foreign policy, see Yankelovich, Daniel, "Poll Positions: What Americans Really Think About U.S. Foreign Policy". *Foreign Affairs*, LXXXIV-5 (September/October 2005), 2-16.

<sup>10</sup> On America as "überpower," see Hirsh, Michael, *At War with Ourselves: Why America Is Squandering Its Chance to Build a Better World*. New York, Oxford University Press, 2003, 1-25.

The maturation of the U.S. empire in the Persian Gulf has resembled that of Great Britain, which oversaw the region for two-thirds of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. When British power in the Middle East started to ebb in the late 1940s, London abandoned its penchant for unilateralism in favor of partnerships with the United States. As U.K. influence in the area receded, the American stamp on Gulf events became unmistakable. The Iranian Revolution threatened to wreck the U.S. empire in the Persian Gulf, but the Iran-Iraq War brought renewed American relevance to the region as Baghdad under Saddam Hussein and the GCC countries worked to fend off the common Iranian enemy. To do so, they sought U.S. cooperation. America happily obliged, a decision that allowed it to assert itself within the Gulf just as the Cold War ended. Hussein's fateful decision to invade Kuwait in August 1990 then enabled Washington to entrench itself within the region<sup>11</sup>.

Following 9/11, the United States seized an opportunity to dispose of Hussein, in the expectation that his ouster would usher in a true era of Pax Americana, whose establishment throughout the Greater Middle East would redound to Israel's advantage as well as to its own. Yet, given the similarities between post-invasion Iraq and Yugoslavia in the 1990s, Iraqi economic and political problems, especially vicious sectarian strife between Sunni and Shi'ite militias in Baghdad and some other cities, could very well result in full-fledged civil war. Ironically, Iraq's constitution may facilitate the country's fracture into three entities – Kurdish, Shi'ite, and Sunni – that adjacent states (particularly Turkey, Iran, and Syria) will seek to influence and manipulate. Compounding these difficulties, a virulent insurgency, made up of Iraqi Sunnis and foreign (especially al-Qaeda) terrorists, is trying

very hard to expel U.S. soldiers from the Arab heartland. To thwart its foes, the American military has evolved a "counterinsurgency doctrine", following three years of bitter lessons in "asymmetrical" urban warfare. Still, the insurgents may yet succeed, especially if civil war in Iraq renders the U.S. position untenable. With American public opinion skeptical of the White House's Iraq policy and with the Democrats holding the majority in Congress following the November 2006 elections, the Bush administration will struggle mightily to extricate the United States from another quagmire on its imperial periphery. Should a worst-case scenario materialize, Washington's geopolitical clout in the region will weaken, perhaps dramatically so in the short term. But the American empire in the Persian Gulf will survive unless revolution quickly sweeps away Arab Gulf regimes – an unlikely event<sup>12</sup>.

Even if the United States were to withdraw ignominiously from Iraq à la Vietnam, Washington would still retain considerable sway over the emirate countries of the Arab Gulf. Thanks to its "emirates" strategy, evolved since *Operation Desert Shield*, America possesses substantial military, political, and economic assets in the region that could compensate for any loss of U.S. influence in Iraq. Should any country or stateless entity, such as al-Qaeda, threaten American interests in the Gulf, the White House could reply in kind by ordering U.S. servicemen and -women stationed in Kuwait, Qatar, and other emirates to strike enemy targets. Unless and until America's enemies possess weapons of mass destruction, this ability to exert significant force quickly and effectively within the Greater Middle East should ensure that the United States will not give up its preponderant position within the Persian Gulf any time soon. To achieve its policy objectives in the Gulf, however, America

<sup>11</sup> On the British Empire in the Persian Gulf, see Rabi, Uzi, "Britain's 'Special Position' in the Gulf: Its Origins, Dynamics and Legacy". *Middle Eastern Studies*, XLII-3 (May 2006), 351-364.

<sup>12</sup> Two weeks before the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, in a 6 March 2003 talk at Johns Hopkins University's School for Advanced International Studies, *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman spoke of two scenarios that could await the United States following the overthrow of Saddam Hussein's regime. In the first scenario, Washington would win the Arab version of post-war Germany. In the second scenario, which Friedman considered more probable, the White House would inherit the Arab version of Yugoslavia. C-SPAN aired Friedman's talk. On how the Iraqi Government is trying to cope with sectarian violence, see Opiel, Jr., Richard A.; Mizher, Qais, "Iraqi Leader Unveils New Security Plan Amid Rising Violence". *The New York Times*, 3 October 2006. For an analysis of the Iraqi constitution, see Glanz, James, "Constitution or Divorce Agreement?". *The New York Times*, 9 October 2005. On the U.S. military "counterinsurgency doctrine", see Gordon, Michael R., "Military Hones a New Strategy on Insurgency", *The New York Times*, 5 October 2006. On how the Iraq War has only exacerbated America's terrorism problem, see DeYoung, Karen, "Spy Agencies Say Iraq War Hurting U.S. Terror Fight". *The Washington Post*, 24 September 2006.

may have to resort continuously to unilateral imperialism, even though it might prefer to proceed otherwise. Alliance imperialism has served the United States better historically, but such a strategy may not be possible if the Bush administration and its successors prefer to dismiss the opinions of their friends while self-righteously promoting an infallible American exceptionalism. Although such an attitude, should it persist, will likely undermine the U.S. empire in the Persian Gulf at some point, current American hubris need not set the country on a path of inexorable imperial decline. Like a ship off course, the United States will likely have many opportunities to correct its position and avert a wreck<sup>13</sup>.

Regardless of what type of contingent imperialism it may opt for in the coming years, Washington will have to determine whether it can achieve *both stability and democracy* within the Persian Gulf and indeed throughout the Greater Middle East. The disparity between American and Arab definitions of democracy, even if unacknowledged by the Bush administration, may prove especially problematic for the United States. As scholar Reza Aslan points out, “[w]hen [U.S.] politicians speak of bringing democracy to the Middle East, they mean specifically an American secular democracy, not an indigenous Islamic one”. More worrisome than American parochialism, newly enfranchised Arabs may very well vote for intensely anti-American parties, thereby potentially jeopardizing U.S. interests in the Persian Gulf and elsewhere in the Greater Middle East. Such a possibility, and its likely adverse consequences, preoccupies U.S. policymakers. President Bush may have committed his country to “ending tyranny in the world” in his

Second Inaugural Address, but he and his predecessors have tolerated, if not tacitly or explicitly endorsed, Arab and Iranian authoritarians, contradicting America’s worldwide promotion of democracy but suiting its geopolitical and economic goals. Even as the United States lost important parts of its informal Gulf empire (Iraq in 1958 and Iran in 1979), it rebounded with new tactics, something every imperium must do<sup>14</sup>.

Just as evolutionary biology informs its students that species must adapt to unfamiliar environments or else die, history tells the story of empires that could not adjust to modified political circumstances. Hence, formal empires that relied on imposed rule may have disappeared forever with the fall of the Soviet Empire in 1989. In the coming decades, it may be that only “empire by invitation” and a refusal to meddle overtly in another country’s domestic politics, unless instructed by the United Nations, can ensure imperial success. Until 9/11 and *Operation Iraqi Freedom*, Washington seemed in sync with Great-Power necessity in an era of global communications and instant information. America’s democratic ways – its respect for dissenting points of view and tendency toward compromise – meshed with international norms such as self-determination and freedom from oppression. Despite the occupation of Iraq and the resultant enmity, the United States retains the ability to intervene in the Persian Gulf when it needs to and hold back when it must. As the preeminent power in the region, it can defeat any area or extra-regional opponent in a conventional war. But, if major changes to the political, economic, military, or cultural environment occur, then the U.S. empire in the Gulf will have to adapt or else suffer the

<sup>13</sup> On Washington’s “emirates” strategy, see O’Reilly, Marc J.; Renfro, Wesley B., “Evolving Empire: America’s ‘Emirates’ Strategy in the Persian Gulf”. Unpublished article. For a recent analysis of American exceptionalism, see Lieven, Anatol, *America Right or Wrong: An Anatomy of American Nationalism*. New York, Oxford University Press, 2004.

<sup>14</sup> Aslan, Reza, *No god but God: The Origins, Evolution, and Future of Islam*. New York, Random House, 2006, 260-261 and Bush, George W. 20 January 2005. “Second Inaugural Address” (delivered in Washington, D.C.) [document online] Available from Internet at: <<http://www.whitehouse.gov>>. Interestingly, Bahrain declared itself a constitutional monarchy in 2002, making it, in theory at least, the only democracy, or pseudo democracy, among the emirate states of the Persian Gulf, countries which the United States staunchly supports. See Dyer, Gwynne, “Democracy for Bahrain”. *The Blade* (Toledo), February 25 2002, A7 and “Bahrain Turnout Hailed for 1st Vote in 30 Years”. *The Blade* (Toledo), 25 October 2002, A2. Unfortunately for the Bush administration, officials in Bahrain may be reverting to their autocratic ways. See Fattah, Hassan M., “Report Cites Bid by Sunnis in Bahrain to Rig Elections”. *The New York Times*, 2 October 2006. The penchant of Middle East leaders for “liberal autocracy” makes democratization that much more difficult to effect. See Takeyh, Ray, “Close, But No Democracy”. *The National Interest*, 78 (Winter 2004/05), 57-64. For more on democratization in the Middle East and elsewhere, see “Does He Know Where It’s Leading?”. *The Economist*, 30 July 2005, 22-24; “Democracy and the West”. *Middle East International*, 1999, 3 and Smith, Tony, *America’s Mission: The United States and the Worldwide Struggle for Democracy in the Twentieth Century*. Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 1994.

same fate – extinction – as many perfectly acclimated creatures that perished when their habitats underwent transformation<sup>15</sup>.

Whether the United States will continue its preponderant role and reliance on contingent imperialism will thus depend on intra-regional dynamics and international developments, such as those associated with America's "War on Terror". Domestic factors, such as the country's deficit spending, negative balance of trade, "squeezed" middle class, and underfunded entitlement programs such as Social Security, will also impact the U.S. ability to intervene in the Persian Gulf. Already slowed by "strategic fatigue", Washington will have to cope with economic burdens that historically have undermined empires. To avoid "imperial overstretch", the U.S. Government will have to reevaluate its priorities, both national and global, especially in an era where China looms as the United States' foremost competitor. Like Washington, Beijing must secure fuel supplies so that its society can prosper. That members of a renewed "axis of oil", led by Venezuela and Russia, seem intent on selling their valuable commodity to China and India, instead of Western countries, only presages a "resource war" sure to tax America economically and strategically<sup>16</sup>.

Unless China and the United States, as well as other advanced and developing economies, alter their consumption habits, the Persian Gulf will continue to supply a crucial percentage of the world's petroleum and natural gas. If Beijing continues to ink deals with Gulf energy exporters, then Washington will likely lose influence within the region. Although worrisome, increased Chinese

involvement in Gulf affairs need not imperil the U.S. position in the area. If, however, America incurs serious defeat in what scholar Andrew Bacevich calls World War IV, a Gulf-centered conflict under way since 1980 now synonymous with the "War on Terror", then Washington may be kicked out of the Gulf. Possible scenarios that could effect such a sea-change include the familiar – Islamic revolutionaries overthrowing the conservative regimes in the Arabian Peninsula – as well as the obvious, but rarely acknowledged: Arab oil monarchies opting for a different security patron (e.g., China)<sup>17</sup>.

Washington could very well accept such an outcome since OPEC must sell its petroleum at a price the rest of the world can afford. Otherwise, the United States and other countries dependent upon oil will likely turn to alternative fuels and energy conservation, a decision that could bankrupt the Persian Gulf states. If America moves away from a fossil fuel-based economy (President Bush acknowledged his country's "addiction" to oil in 2006, but took no meaningful steps to curtail U.S. consumption), then it may voluntarily withdraw from the Gulf. Given that such a scenario is now plausible in the wake of escalating gasoline prices (Americans paid in excess of \$3 per gallon much of 2005-6), a very different U.S. Gulf policy could materialize at some point in the next decade. Of course, America's role in that region might instead intensify.

With American geopolitical ambition con- vulsion the Persian Gulf, the region is experiencing yet another round of intrusive, pervasive foreign meddling. Notes Bacevich: "From the Carter Doctrine came a new pattern of U.S. military actions,

<sup>15</sup> For discussions of empire by invitation versus empire by imposition, see Gaddis, John Lewis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of American National Security Policy during the Cold War*. New York, Oxford University Press, 2005, 384-385 (revised and expanded edition) and id., *Surprise, Security, and the American Experience*. Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2004, 106-113. On America's "democratic empire", see id., *We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History*. New York, Clarendon Press, 1997, 288-289. On comparisons to evolutionary biology, see *ibid.*, 295. See also Gould, Stephen Jay, "The Evolution of Life on the Earth". *Scientific American*, October 1994, 85-91. Using as a template Charles Darwin's emphasis on "local adaptation" (*ibid.*, 85) and paleontologist Gould's reminder of the importance of contingency in the development of organisms over time, students of world politics should understand that empires adapt to local circumstances, but not necessarily in predictable ways. Good fortune can ensure the perpetuation of empire whereas bad luck can assure its destruction.

<sup>16</sup> On America's economic liabilities, see Layne, Christopher, "Impotent Power? Re-examining the Nature of America's Hegemonic Power". *The National Interest*, 85 (Sept./Oct. 2006), 41-47. On U.S. strategic fatigue, see Fuller, Graham E., "Strategic Fatigue". *The National Interest*, 84 (Summer 2006), 37-42. On the new "axis of oil", see Leverett, Flynt; Noël, Pierre, "The New Axis of Oil". *The National Interest*, 84 (Summer 2006), 62-70. On the upcoming "resource war", see Joshua Kurlantzick, "Crude Awakening". *The New Republic*, 2 October 2006, 19-27.

<sup>17</sup> Bacevich, *The New American...*, op. cit., 175-204. Bacevich considers the Cold War World War III.

one that emerged through fits and starts. Although not fully apparent until the 1990s, changes in U.S. military posture and priorities gradually converted the Persian Gulf into the epicenter of American grand strategy and World War IV's principal theater of operations". Washington's shift away from a Cold-War policy that spotlighted Europe and East Asia underscored the U.S. need for energy security. Securing scarce natural resources is something empires have sought for millennia. The White House may not conceive of America's policy in the Gulf that way, but many observers of U.S. foreign policy perceive no difference between American behavior in the region and that of previous imperialia<sup>18</sup>.

The United States may not purposely seek to reprise the British, French, Ottomans, and Portuguese, all of which evolved empires in the Persian Gulf in recent centuries, but the American rhetorical aversion to colonialism will not shelter it from Middle Eastern opprobrium (what *The Economist* calls the "axis of resistance"), nor will it make Washington's experience easy, especially given the current global "clash of ignorance" and what Reza Aslan calls the "Islamic Reformation", a deadly political and theological contest, analogous to the Christian Reformation, pitting Islamic radicals such Osama bin Laden versus moderates. Although America's Gulf empire combines classical features (e.g., a reliance on force) with modern ones (e.g., a commitment to self-determination), this hybrid, as scholar Fouad Ajami opines, "will never be a happy imperium". The United States and its citizens may consider themselves exceptional – most imperialists do – but historically empires, both formal and informal, have not fared well in the Middle East.

Sadly for both Americans and inhabitants of the region, who know each other mostly via stereotypes, bittersweet U.S. relations with Persian Gulf countries since World War II only presage more of the same in the coming years. Fearing an Islamic "totalitarian empire", an alternative President Bush considers far worse than American supremacy, Washington seeks, *ironically*, imperial success in the Middle East without ever admitting to such a purpose<sup>19</sup>.

Whether or not the rest of the world concurs with the White House's judgment that Islamic terrorism constitutes an existential threat will undoubtedly contribute to the near-term fate of America's empire in the Persian Gulf. With that critical issue in mind, supporters and opponents of the U.S. imperium in the Gulf continue to debate its benevolence and malevolence as well as compare it to the British Empire, the *Pax Romana*, and even to imperial Venice. Like journalist David Ignatius, these analysts are asking: "How does a nation have the benefits of imperial reach without the ruinous costs of empire"? Yet, no matter how the United States copes with its imperial predicament, it will almost certainly emulate past empires in the region. When the American empire in the Gulf will vanish remains unknowable, however. It could thrive for many decades or it could decline precipitously, or both. The U.S. imperial trajectory in the Gulf tends to be jagged rather than predictable. Apogees and nadirs have occurred and will likely reoccur without the empire disintegrating. If American power and influence erode irrevocably, then some other Great Power could succeed the United States as regional Leviathan, just as America took over for the British in the 1960s. In an alternate

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 183.

<sup>19</sup> For analyses of the Middle East and of U.S.-Middle East relations, see "Coalitions of the Unwilling". *The Economist*, October 21 2006, 25-28; Little, Douglas, *American Orientalism: The United States and the Middle East Since 1945*. Chapel Hill, NC, University of North Carolina Press, 2002; Telhami, Shibley, *The Stakes: America and the Middle East: The Consequences of Power and the Choice for Peace*. Boulder, CO, Westview Press, 2002; Lustick, Ian, "The Absence of Middle Eastern Great Powers: Political 'Backwardness' in Historical Perspective". *International Organization*, LI-4 (Fall 1997), 653-683 and Brown, L. Carl, *International Politics and the Middle East: Old Rules, Dangerous Game*, Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 1984. French Foreign Minister Philippe Douste-Blazy referred to "a clash of ignorance". See Kessler, "Anger...", op. cit. For Aslan's discussion of an "Islamic Reformation", see Aslan, *No god...*, op. cit., 249-266. Aslan expounded upon his thesis during a luncheon talk and evening keynote address he gave at Heidelberg College (Tiffin, OH) on 25 September 2006. On Bin Laden and jihadism, see Gerges, Fawaz A., *Journey of the Jihadist: Inside Muslim Militancy*. Orlando, FL, Harcourt, 2006. The Ajami quote can be found in id, "Where U.S. Power...", op. cit. See also Ajami, Fouad, "The Sentry's Solitude". *Foreign Affairs*, LXXX-6 (November/December 2001), 2-16. For the "totalitarian empire" quote, see "President Bush's Speech". *The New York Times*, 6 October 2005. On alternatives "more frightening than your own hegemony", see Gaddis, *Surprise...*, op. cit., 117. On irony in American history, see Niebuhr, Reinhold, *The Irony of American History*. New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1952.

scenario, a historic Middle Eastern power such as Iran could reestablish its own political as well as military hegemony within the region. For now, though, the U.S. empire in the Persian Gulf conti-

nues an *unexceptional*, centuries-old habit – one that the Roman Caesars, Ottoman sultans, and British monarchs would have easily recognized<sup>20</sup>.

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<sup>20</sup> Ignatius, David, "From Venice, a Lesson on Empire". *The Washington Post*, 20 September 2006. For a recent assessment of empires and America's imperial venture in the Greater Middle East, see Ferguson, Niall, "Empires with Expiration Dates". *Foreign Policy* (September/October 2006).