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1 If Britain obtained its empire in "a fit of absence of mind," as Sir John Seeley once remarked, the United States has acquired its empire in a state of deep denial, or so Michael Ignatieff argued in an article from 2003. It would seem that this denial characterizes large portions of the American public and most members of the current Presidential administration. However, an increasing number of political and historical writers and journalists have begun to discuss the notion that the United States may, after all, resemble a traditional empire.

2 The two Bush administrations have been forced to react to this notion on a number of occasions. In 2003, National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice was asked by a German news team if she accepted that America could be compared to the Roman Empire. As may perhaps be predicted, her reply was that she did not, because “the United States has no imperial ambitions.” Similarly, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld was cornered by an Al-Jazeera journalist in 2003 and asked if the U.S. had come to Iraq to build an empire. Rumsfeld, again predictably, insisted that the US "is not a colonial power. We have never been a colonial power. We don't take our force and go around the world and try to take other people's real estate and other people's resources, their oil. That's just not what the United States does. We never have and we never will. That's just not how democracies behave."

3 Rumsfeld is of course wrong here. Whether out of convenience or ignorance, he leaves out the fact that at the end of the Spanish-American War in 1898, the United States acquired Guam and Puerto Rico, bought the Philippines for $20 million from Spain and seized control of Cuba, prompting Rudyard Kipling to write his famous poem “The White Man’s Burden”. The inclusion of the Philippines also generated a great deal of imperialist rhetoric from President McKinley who soon launched a campaign for the “benevolent
assimilation" of the Philippines. This campaign eventually resulted in a prolonged colonial war that claimed the lives of more than 4000 American soldiers, some 16,000 Philippine soldiers and approximately 200,000 civilians.6

4 Even so, the average American would probably still agree with Rumsfeld’s reading of America’s past and present. After all, the nation was founded on a revolution against an oppressive British empire, and the Declaration of Independence is a painstaking record of the crimes supposedly committed by that empire against the American people. Furthermore, traditional American historiography tends to agree that America is not an empire. Imperialism is not democratic, and since America is a democracy it follows that it cannot be an empire.

5 Nevertheless, many political commentators, historians, politicians and laymen inside as well as outside the United States have begun to diverge from this particular reading of American history and see the comparison between the United States and the Roman Empire as not very far-fetched after all. As a result the debate on American empire has grown into a vast field in recent years. This debate can be understood in several ways: As an attempt to rethink American historiography; an effort to predict the challenges America is likely to face in the future; an endeavor to establish historical and political legitimacy for an expansive American foreign policy; or as an undertaking to debunk this same policy through historical and political examples.

6 From this perspective, the aim of this study is thus not to attempt to answer the question: ‘Can the United States be considered a formal empire?’ The answer to this depends on the theoretical and historical position one assumes when investigating this matter. This article instead surveys the ‘empire’ literature, engaging with several of the main authors and analysing the motivations for and implications of the various standpoints taken.

7 The number of works exploring the issue of American empire is now so large that it is unfeasible to address them all in a single article. When selecting texts for inclusion, a range of political and theoretical positions have been covered, from Marxism to the neoconservative right. Since the intention is to map the debate rather than decide on the issue that is debated, the main focus is on texts with a wide circulation. Thus, more space is given to the contested, but widely studied, Empire by Hardt and Negri than to other neo-Marxist texts that may perhaps be more theoretically stringent, and more time is spent discussing Noam Chomsky’s popular Hegemony or Survival than David Harvey’s more scholarly The New Imperialism.7

8 Empire has been an issue in North American history since the arrival of Christopher Columbus in 1492. However, this year is not the date foremost in the minds of most writers exploring the notion of American empire. Instead, virtually all of those who write or comment on American empire return to September 11, 2001. To many Americans, 9/11 signifies a turning point in history similar to the British capture and burning of Washington in 1814, or the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941. It is also commonly argued that these historical events triggered exceptional responses in American foreign policy.8 For many of those critical of current American foreign policy, the global strategies following 9/11 can also be described as an exceptional response, a response best labeled empire. In other words, government measures taken after 9/11, in particular the War on Terror and the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, but also the Patriot Act, are visible evidence that we are witnessing an imperial epoch in American foreign (and domestic) policy.
The beginning of the 21st century does not mark the first time America has been called imperialistic, of course. The political left protested vocally and sometimes violently against what they referred to as US imperialism in Asia during the Korean and, especially, the Vietnam War. However, there are a number of important differences between the notion of American empire today and that of forty years ago. Today, America is the sole superpower. Its military, economic and cultural might is unsurpassed and essentially unchallenged. It is the only nation that can be thought of as a global empire today. Another important difference is the fact that the notion of American imperialism is no longer only used pejoratively. A number of political writers and historians have proudly declared themselves ‘imperialists’ and have argued that America, whether the government accepts it or not, is to all extents and purposes an empire.

In other words, the discourse on American empire is very heterogeneous. In this way, it is different from the British discourse on imperialism that existed during the heyday of the British empire. After all, the American discourse post-dates a tremendous number of postcolonial works that have examined both the practice and the ideologies of imperialism. Therefore, empire is not so easily presented as an unproblematic undertaking today. The debate on American empire also involves a debate on when American imperialism is meant to have begun. For some of the writers discussed here, the genealogy of American empire is very important as it enables them to see the current invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq as a continuation, rather than a break with, American democratic tradition.

In order to clarify the various positions and perspectives taken in the ‘empire’ debate, this article divides the different authors into four separate groups. Two groups are critical of American empire (Republicans and Conservatives and Postcolonialists, Marxists, Socialists, and Radicals), one sees it as a natural phenomenon rather than as a political policy (Neutral Conservatives and Realists), and one is cautiously or openly optimistic on its meaning and implications (Neoconservatives and Liberal Imperialists). This division is in some ways highly artificial, but it is necessary to illustrate the importance of political outlook when discussing the matter of American empire in recent commentary.

To begin with, British journalist Jonathan Freedland has presented what can perhaps be named a liberal / republican critique of American foreign policy after 9/11. Freedland argues that this policy, as evidenced in the invasion of Iraq, is essentially un-American. In his article “Emperor George” Freedland claims that the Bush “administration, and this war, are not typical of the US. On the contrary, on almost every measure, they are exceptions to the American rule.” To Freedland, then, the aggressive foreign policy of the US does indeed appear as a bid for empire, but he believes that this bid is intimately associated with the ascendancy of George W. Bush and his flock of neoconservative hawks. In other words, Freedland would agree with Rumsfeld’s contention that America has never been a colonial power, even if he would disapprove of the road Rumsfeld has helped steer American foreign policy along.

The dislike of American empire expressed by Freedland is also shared by many within US right-wing politics. Former Republican Presidential candidate and advisor Patrick Buchanan has directed fierce criticism against American foreign policy as it has developed since the end of the Cold War. In A Republic, Not an Empire: Reclaiming America (1999), Buchanan argues that the policies pursued after the fall of the Soviet Union represented a dangerous deviation from traditional American values. He furthermore suggests that America might find itself facing the same imperial overstretch that ruined
the British empire: “Our country is today travelling the same path that was trod by the British Empire - to the same fate.”12 The position of Buchanan, sometimes referred to as a Paleoconservative, (a designation that serves, if nothing else, to differentiate his position from that of the neoconservatives) has its origins in US isolationism. According to isolationist principles, which can be traced back to Washington’s famous pronouncement that Americans should not “entangle our peace and prosperity in the toils of European ambition,” the US should not intervene in international affairs unless directly threatened.13

Another critic is Claes G. Ryn, perhaps best described as a conservative philosopher with a historical perspective, who published a scathing indictment of America’s foreign policy and of its political, rhetorical and ideological underpinnings. In America the Virtuous: The Crisis of Democracy and the Quest for Empire (2003) Ryn argues that any attempt at constructing a genealogy of imperialism beginning with the Founding Fathers constitutes an attempt to hijack national prestige while simultaneously subverting American democracy.14 Like Freedland and Buchanan, Ryn firmly believes that the Founding Fathers of the United States had democratic, as opposed to imperialist, ambitions, and, again like Freedland and Buchanan, he suggests that this fact ought to steer American politics away from imperialist ambitions.15

Finally, in Incoherent Empire (2003), Michael Mann also proposes that American imperialism is essentially new. Mann is a sociologist and is careful not to ally himself with any political faction, calling himself a scholar rather than an activist. Consequently it is not a straightforward matter to include him in this first group, but he does argue that empire is a relatively new phase of US foreign policy. This phase can be related to Clinton’s penchant for nation building and an aggressive foreign policy in the wake of the Cold War, but he names “world-historical bad luck” as the main contributing factor, referring here to a malfunctioning electoral system, the sudden rise of the “chicken hawks” of the Bush administration, and the terrorist attacks of 9/11.16

In Mann’s view, this bad luck has conspired to create a wave of new imperialism that must ultimately be understood as rampant militarism. While it may perhaps be well-meaning, it stumbles across the globe, leaving death and destruction rather than peace and democratic process in its wake. To Mann, this is a path that the American voting public can, should, and probably will abandon as the moral and, more importantly, financial price of new imperialism becomes clear to them.

To Ryn, Buchanan, Mann, and Freedland, imperialism and the recent trends in US foreign policy represent certain ‘un-American’ tendencies. Thus, the War on Terror and the rhetoric which accompanies it appear to them as a distortion of an ancient, American democratic ideal.

However, this view is perceived as simplistic by many other writers, and while they may certainly agree with Freedland that the current aggressive foreign policy of the Bush administration is essentially undemocratic, they doubt that there is anything un-American about it. The US, they claim, was firmly acting within a long-established tradition when it invaded both Afghanistan and Iraq.

To writers working within the field of postcolonial studies, this is familiar intellectual territory. In his seminal work Culture and Imperialism (1993), Edward Said argues that while the British and French empires of the early twentieth century have fallen apart, imperialism is far from dead, and he suggests, quoting extensively from other writers,
that the United States is the nation that today shoulders the burden of empire.\textsuperscript{17} Other central figures in this field, such as Hamid Dabashi, have also explored what can perhaps best be described as the American (neo) colonial venture. Indeed, American expansionism, along with the (popular) culture that has accompanied this expansionism, has, to some extent, revitalized the field of both postcolonialism and Cultural Geography, producing works such as Melani McAlister’s *Epic Encounters: Culture, Media, and US Interests in the Middle East, 1945-2000* (2001) and David Harvey’s *The New Imperialism* (2003).\textsuperscript{18} Postcolonial studies have, of course, drawn significant theoretical inspiration from Marxist studies of imperialism, and Marxists and neo-Marxists have provided significant, if not always widely circulated, contributions to the discussion on US Empire. Among those labeling themselves as neo-Marxists are Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt, authors of the provocative *Empire* (2000). *Empire* is a controversial text which claims that while America may not be exactly imperialistic, it is certainly an Empire. However, with ‘Empire’ Hardt and Negri do not refer to a nation state colonizing the world to protect its trade, but a more diffuse entity described as “a network of power structures and counterbalances structured into an inclusive and unlimited architecture.”\textsuperscript{19} In the wake of globalization and global mass media, this entity serves as the center of Western capitalist order.

The discussion that ensues owes much to postmodern thinkers such as Foucault, Deleuze, and Gramsci, and *Empire* has itself been criticized by Marxist scholars. Marxists have after all called the US an empire since the foundation of Marxist ideology. If imperialism is the highest stage of capitalism, as Lenin would have it, it makes sense to think of the United States as a bastion of, at least, cultural and economic imperialism and, increasingly, material and military imperialism as well.

However, in the political and historical landscape of the United States, Marxist historiography has generally lacked impact. Nevertheless there is a significant community of, if not Marxist, then certainly Left-leaning radical scholars in the US, many of whom being well placed within the academic community and able to use this position to interrogate US foreign policy. The most well-known radical critic of US expansionist policy is Noam Chomsky. Chomsky, referred to as both an anarchist and a libertarian socialist, has waged a long war against American empire, and his book *Hegemony or Survival: Americas Quest for Global Dominance* (2003) deals explicitly with this problem. Unlike Freedland, Chomsky does not believe that American empire rose out of the ashes of the World Trade Center.\textsuperscript{20} A crucial claim in his book is that American foreign policy today is characterized, and long has been characterized, by what he calls an “Imperial Grand Strategy”. Chomsky has borrowed this term from John Ikenberry and traces the “basic principles” of an “American imperial grand strategy” back at least to “the early days of World War II.”\textsuperscript{21} Chomsky argues that “[even] before the US entered the war [WWII], high level planners and analysts concluded that in the postwar world the US would seek ‘to hold unquestioned power,’ acting to ensure the ‘limitation of any exercise of sovereignty’ by states that might interfere with its global designs.”\textsuperscript{22} Chomsky contends that current imperial grand strategy was clearly outlined in the 2002 National Security Strategy. For Chomsky the only change that 9/11 signified as far as foreign policy is concerned was a willingness by the Bush administration to act upon this strategy with determination and ruthlessness. Chomsky’s work is part of a larger American Empire project, consisting of 17 volumes by late 2007, and a fellow author in this series is Chalmers Johnson. As early as 2000, in *Blowback: The Costs and Consequences of*
American Empire, Johnson predicted that the American empire was going to face considerable resistance around the globe in the form of terrorism and social unrest.\textsuperscript{23} Later, in *The Sorrows of Empire: Militarism, Secrecy, and the End of the Republic* (2004), Johnson does not perceive American empire to begin after 9/11 but argues that its roots go back to the Monroe Doctrine of 1823 “when the United States declared all of Latin America its sphere of influence and busily enlarged its own territory at the expense of the indigenous people of North America.”\textsuperscript{24}

Furthermore, Johnson takes direct issue with those who claim that in order to qualify as an empire, you have to have formal colonies. For those that deny that America is an empire, this absence of formal colonies is crucial evidence that America, after all, is not the new Roman or British empire. To Johnson, the lack of formal colonies proves little. Today, the US has established more than 725 bases throughout the world, and Johnson argues effectively that the establishment of these bases alone qualifies America as an empire, despite the fact that it has annexed few territories:

*These bases continued through a chain of command and supervised by the Pentagon without any civilian oversight, were tied into our developing military-industrial complex and deeply affected the surrounding indigenous cultures, almost invariably for the worse. They have helped turn us into a new kind of military empire – a consumerist Sparta, a warrior culture that flaunts the air-conditioned housing, movie theatres, supermarkets, golf courses, and swimming pools, of its legionnaires.*\textsuperscript{25}

Whatever the original reason the United States entered a country and set up a base, it remains there for imperial reasons – regional and global hegemony, denial of the territory to rivals, providing access for American companies, maintenance of ‘stability’ or ‘credibility’ as a military force, and simple inertia.\textsuperscript{26}

Johnson continues his critique of American imperial ambition in his most recent book, *Nemesis: The Last Days of the American Republic* (2006), where he echoes Chomsky in cautioning the American citizen: “Like the Chinese, Ottoman, Hapsburg, imperial German, Nazi, imperial Japanese, British, French, Dutch, Portuguese, and Soviet empires in the last century, we are approaching the edge of a huge waterfall and are about to plunge over it.”\textsuperscript{27}

To Chomsky and Johnson, as to Ryn and Buchanan, American empire is bad by default. To others, as we shall see, it is a development to be celebrated. However, a number of writers are reluctant to take sides, and seem content with analyzing America’s state in the world. Many of these writers can be labeled Realists, Neorealists or perhaps Liberal Realists, as they are interested in the proliferation of American power as such rather than in the ethics of this proliferation. Their audience tends to be those involved in International Relations and many are, or have been, involved in government agencies concerned with the making of foreign policy.

A prolific and widely read author whose first work can be said to belong to this category is Andrew J. Bacevich. His *American Empire: The Realities and Consequences of U.S. Diplomacy* states that “like it or not, America today is Rome, committed irreversibly to the maintenance and, where feasible, expansion of an empire that differs from every other empire in history. This is hardly a matter for celebration; but neither is there any purpose served by denying the facts.”\textsuperscript{28} In his book, Bacevich discusses a development that began in 1898 with the Spanish-American War and which was later infinitely accelerated with the fall of the Soviet Union. To Bacevich, the notion of America as the “reluctant superpower”, thrust unwillingly onto the international arena and more or less forced by
outside agency to join WWI and WWII, invade Vietnam, attack Iraq in 1990 and bomb the Serbs in 1999, is a myth. In place of this myth, Bacevich traces a seemingly well-structured, if unarticulated, “strategy of openness” which has kept US foreign policy on track, especially after the end of the Cold War. This strategy, fuelled by the need for a growing economy, has made the US resemble the Roman (rather than the British) empire, with proconsuls in every part of the world. Bacevich is wary of this development, but the purpose of American Empire is not to condemn it, but to explore it.

In more recent publications Bacevich is much more critical. Greatly opposed to the invasion of Iraq, he has focused his analysis of American empire on the militarism that follows in its wake. His most recent book, The New American Militarism: How Americans Are Seduced by War (2005), a work praised by Chalmers Johnson, is a thoroughly historical investigation, and a thorough condemnation, of American militarism. It is therefore appropriate to view Bacevich as a conservative critic of American empire today.

Other writers who have contented themselves, in Realist fashion, with mapping the evolution of American empire include William J. Odom, former Head of the National Security Council, and foreign policy expert Robert Dujarric. In America’s Inadvertent Empire (2004) they argue, like Bacevich, that the US is indeed imperial:

[The] United States has created, perhaps inadvertently, a new type of imperial regime. It is an empire, but not the traditional kind. Structurally and qualitatively it differs fundamentally from all past empires. Using the terms imperial and empire risks confusion because those words convey notions of a hierarchy of power, subordination, and dominance that are either missing from the American empire or only loosely institutionalized. Yet it is difficult to find apter terminology.

Odom and Dujarric see nothing inherently problematic with the United States having acquired this power. To them, it is perceived as a natural consequence of the break-up of the Soviet Union. Furthermore, they see American empire positively as a network of alliances with other nation states. Thus, while the proper center of the empire is the United States, it depends on peripheral centers of power such as Britain, France or, in some cases, the United Nations.

Odom and Dujarric are reluctant to comment on the nature of the policy behind, or the moral character of, the invasions of Afghanistan or Iraq. In fact, these authors do not discuss these invasions as evidence that America is an empire at all. Instead, they are interested in the impact that these operations will have on continued American hegemony. Significantly they perceive no actual outside threat to the American empire at this stage in history: “Outside challengers are not a serious threat to it – neither rising powers like China nor Al Qaeda and similar nonstate organizations. They can cause the United States pain and damage, but they cannot destroy American hegemony.” Instead, Odom and Dujarric argue, the real threat to continued American predominance comes from within. Through ill-advised unilateral action in which the US fails to recognize and make use of its imperial allies and members, the singularly powerful American empire may ultimately flounder and collapse.

In America’s Inadvertent Empire Odom and Dujarric seem to suspect that the invasion of Iraq is an example of precisely such ill-advised unilateral action. However, they are also prepared to be proved wrong: “If Iraq were to emerge as a stable state with a moderate regime willing to cooperate with the United States, and if other regional states such as Syria and Iran were to do the same, the American empire would emerge even stronger.”
In this way, Odon and Dujarric see American empire, or American hegemonic preponderance, as a historical fact that must be taken into consideration. From a Realist perspective, it is the failure of taking this fact into consideration, rather than the fact itself, that may spell disaster for America. In other words, if the citizens of the United States do not realize that America is effectively an empire, it risks falling apart due to a lack of understanding of its global limitations, needs and purposes. The invasion of Iraq in 2003, and the Bush doctrine that prompted it, are furthermore, and perhaps paradoxically, seen as evidence that the Bush government has failed to realize the imperial responsibilities of the United States. The invasion thus serves as a threat to continued American global dominance and leadership, rather than as the final evidence that America has imperialistic or neocolonial tendencies.

The Realists or neutral conservatives that are concerned with American empire treat it primarily as a confluence of power and a political phenomenon rather than as a moral problem. However, it is, of course, problematic to suggest that the avoidance to celebrate or indict American empire is in any way politically neutral. At the same time, this position does not resemble that of the more optimistic neoconservatives and liberal imperialists who tend to view American empire, or at least American hegemony, as a potential blessing for a world torn by religious conflict, sectarian violence and political oppression.

What is today referred to as the neoconservative movement can be traced back to the 1950s when disillusionment with and within the New Left, combined with the political philosophy of among others Leo Strauss and Lionel Trilling, generated a new form of conservatism. The liberal or even socialist background of this new breed of conservative made them precisely “New Conservatives”. The ‘neocons’, never a perfectly homogenous group, nevertheless seem to agree that American global leadership is good both for the US and for the world, and that the US should, in the wake of the Cold War, aggressively pursue a position of economic and military supremacy. Referring to the Monroe Doctrine and Theodore Roosevelt’s Corollary as examples of how America has been willing to regulate the business of other nations in the past, neocons have argued that the US has a moral obligation to interfere militarily where the international order, especially when related to American interests, is threatened.

A neocon journalist and historian who has shown a pronounced interest in the concept of American imperialism is Max Boot. Even though Boot has said that he is not sure what it means to be a neocon, his vision of American history and of current American foreign policy is probably best labeled as neoconservative, and his articles have appeared in collections of neoconservative writing. In the wake of 9/11, Boot received a lot of attention for his book on American history and international politics entitled *Savage Wars of Peace: Small Wars and the Rise of American Power*. The title, of course, is taken from Kipling’s aforementioned poem “White Man’s Burden”, but Boot intends neither irony nor sarcasm in using it. Boot’s basic argument is that America’s military history, contrary to common belief and historiography, is a history of “savage wars of peace” or “imperial wars”. Most of the book deals with a series of military conflicts ranging from 1801 to the Gulf War in the early 1990s. To Boot, the Monroe Doctrine is a crucial document which can be seen as evidence that empire was contemplated early on in the history of the United States. In fact, it may be argued that the entire text is an attempt to show that empire is part and parcel of American history and that American military history has been an attempt to enforce Pax Americana throughout the world. Neither Chalmers
Johnson nor Chomsky would necessarily take issue with this. What Johnson and Chomsky would take issue with is Boot’s contention that this has been a good thing and that it does not conflict with American democratic values.

In *Savage Wars of Peace*, as well as in other publications, Boot comes across as one of the most vocal and optimistic supporters of American empire. In “The Case for American Empire”, published shortly after 9/11, he argues that “Afghanistan and other troubled lands today cry out for the sort of enlightened foreign administration once provided by self-confident Englishmen in jodhpurs and pith helmets.” In a more recent article Boot claims the following:

> U.S. imperialism has been the greatest force for good in the world during the past century. It has defeated the monstrous evils of communism and Nazism and lesser evils such as the Taliban and Serbian ethnic cleansing. Along the way, it has helped spread liberal institutions to countries as diverse as South Korea and Panama.

Boot thus supports interventionism and unilateralism as expressed, for example, in the invasion of Iraq. He regrets the fact that the US government has been reluctant to embrace the term American empire, although he can understand why they do not. However, he is adamant that if they are unable to accept the word, they should “definitely embrace the practice.”

The British conservative historian Paul Johnson seconds this argument. Johnson, who received the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2006, has repeatedly argued, like a reincarnated Kipling, that the US must shoulder its imperial burden. Like Boot and Chalmers Johnson, Paul Johnson traces the origins of American empire back to the start of the Republic, arguing that “the Americans were more imperialist than the English” at the time of the American Revolution. Having traced the imperial genealogy back to the inception of the United States, Johnson can argue that Empire is part of the original American ideological make-up:

> [I]t is worth recalling that up to 1860 “empire” was not a term of abuse in the United States. George Washington himself spoke of “the rising American Empire.” Jefferson, aware of the dilemma, claimed that America was “an Empire for liberty.” That is what America is becoming again, in fact if not in name. America’s search for the security against terrorism and rogue states goes hand in hand with liberating their oppressed peoples. From the Evil Empire to an Empire for Liberty is a giant step, a contrast as great as the appalling images of the wasted twentieth century and the brightening dawn of the twenty-first. But America has the musculature and the will to take giant steps, as it has shown in the past.

Another British historian who supports this claim is Niall Ferguson. Ferguson, sometimes labeled a liberal imperialist, is originally a historian of British imperialism. In *Empire: The Rise and Demise of the British World Order and the Lessons for Global Power* (2003) he attempts an interesting revision of British imperialism, painting it in much brighter colors than more critical imperial historians such as Eric Hobsbawm or Lawrence James. The practice of imperialism may not have fared well in the historical, literary and political writing of the past 60 years or so, but Ferguson goes against this orthodoxy, and the timing of *Empire* and its follow-up *Colossus: The Rise and Fall of the American Empire*, published in 2004 was excellent. Ferguson now holds fellowships and professorships at New York University, Oxford and Stanford.

To Ferguson, as to Boot and Paul Johnson, there is nothing inherently wrong with empire. Empires, he argues, can serve both the needs of the imperial centre, the metropolis, and the periphery. That is, they can be altruistic. He acknowledges that the history of the
British empire has its dark moments, but suggests that the empire’s encouragement of free trade compensates for this. He dismisses the notion the “all empires are exploitative in character” with the claim that “there can be – and has been – such a thing as a liberal empire, one that enhances its own security and prosperity precisely by providing the rest of the world with generally beneficial public goods.”

Like Chalmers Johnson, Ferguson also addresses the notion that America cannot be an empire because it does not have any formal colonies, and, again like Johnson, Ferguson mentions the proliferation of American military bases all over the world. He furthermore points out that empire is not simply “direct rule over foreign territories without any political representation of their inhabitants.” In his view, America is largely an empire ruling “indirectly” “through the agency of local potentates rather than British governors.” It is thus an “informal empire.” To Ferguson, then, the US has the makings of the type of “liberal empire” that he thinks the world needs:

What is required is a liberal empire—that is to say, one that not only underwrites the free international exchange of commodities, labor and capital but also creates and upholds the conditions without which markets cannot function—peace and order, the rule of law, noncorrupt administrations.

To return to American history, a central thesis in Colossus is “not merely that the United States is an empire but that it always has been an empire.” Ferguson then goes to great lengths tracing the genealogy of American empire back to the origin of the United States, claiming in words strikingly similar to those of Paul Johnson that “there were no more self-confident imperialists than the Founding Fathers themselves.” Like Boot, Ferguson also stresses the Monroe Doctrine as proof that the imperialist tendencies of the Founding Fathers were continued, and he furthermore argues that both the Roosevelt corollary and the Wilson corollary are additional evidence that the US continued along that road.

However, at the end of the day, Colossus, as is implied by its title, is not as optimistic as anything written by Boot or Paul Johnson. Ferguson is unsure whether the US is prepared to shoulder the white man’s burden, and he fears that it risks imperial overstretch. The US is borrowing billions of dollars from Asia to fund its invasion of Iraq - How is the nation to afford such a sustained imperial enterprise? He also suggests that there is little domestic enthusiasm for the imperial assignment, and that the nation’s “elite” is particularly uninterested in pursuing imperial careers: “Few, if any, of the graduates of Harvard, Stanford, Yale or Princeton aspire to spend their lives trying to turn a sun-scorched sandpit like Iraq into the prosperous capitalist democracy of Paul Wolfowitz’s imaginings.”

Thus, Ferguson worries about imperial denial. While many people outside the US have begun to accept or perhaps resign themselves to the notion of American empire, the people of the US are still caught up in “full-blown myopia” as Ferguson puts it. This is important, he argues, as the US will as a result keep on “allocating insufficient resources to the non-military aspects” of all the imperial projects it becomes involved with. The nation will also tend to “attempt economic and political transformation in an unrealistically short time frame,” something the author claims is happening in Iraq and Afghanistan as he writes.

To conclude this section, attention will be given to an erudite study from 2006, Among Empires: American Ascendancy and Its Predecessors, by Charles S. Maier. Using a number of historical examples, Maier distinguishes between being an empire and having an empire.
Taking the cue from historian Geoffrey Hoskins, Maier suggests that while Russia during the reign of the Tsar was an empire in the sense that it subjected its citizens to an authoritarian rule, Britain had an empire since it allowed the British public considerable political freedom and reserved the more dictatorial aspects of imperialism for the colonies.54

At times, Maier describes US imperial tendencies as highly problematic, especially since, as he states, “the lifeblood of empires is blood.”55 He predicts that a continual embrace of imperial practice and the creation of “imperial institutions” will both generate violence in many places around the globe and may erode civil rights within the US. Nevertheless Maier suggests that American empire might bring with it certain benefits. In fact, he argues that within the US, to “slide toward empire would still allow an ever more diverse American society to persevere in its growing acceptance of multiculturalism and its toleration of immigrants and minorities.”56 From an international perspective, an imperial regime might be able to further the “commitment to spread democracy outside the United States.”57

Perhaps to underline how an empire might, paradoxically, further democratic institutions inside and outside the US, the cover of the book reproduces American painter Thomas Cole’s 1836 painting “Course of Empire: Consummation”. This painting is part of a series of five depicting the birth, development, consummation, destruction and desolation of empire, and it is telling that Among Empires is enveloped by the consummation phase which, in turn, is represented by a Classical empire in all its white marble and splendor.

It would be easy, perhaps, to bombard the academic performance of writers such as Boot and Ferguson with the vast arsenal of critique produced by postcolonial studies. Indeed, Ferguson’s contention that free trade is an a priori good is perhaps a dubious claim and has drawn much criticism from the Left. Similarly, Boot tends to overlook the darker aspects and consequences of imperial practice, and Maier’s contention that the imperial reconstitution of American political life may further democracy nationally as well as internationally seems somewhat naïve.

However, the object of this paper is not to determine whether America is an empire or not, or even if it ought to be one or not. Instead, the focus is on how and why these writers explore the notion of empire itself. From this perspective, it would seem that most take issue with mainstream American historical tradition. As I have suggested, according to this tradition American imperialism was a brief and misguided phase occurring almost accidentally after the end of the Spanish-American War in 1898. It furthermore states that while the US has certainly exerted a great deal of power in various parts of the world, this power has been, for the most part, economic and/or cultural.

I would suggest that this attempt to revise traditional American history can be understood in two ways, and these ways are not mutually exclusive. Firstly, the revisionist histories produced by neoconservative and liberal imperialist historians can be perceived as attempts to establish a form of historical legitimacy for American empire. Secondly, these histories, as well as other works less optimistic about empire, can also be seen as a re-evaluation of American history that is essentially sincere and part of a broad, iconoclastic attempt at understanding America’s past and present.
To focus on the first aspect, it should be noted that the position of Jefferson and the Founding Fathers is of crucial importance. Those who see American empire as possibly beneficial for both world order and American society seem particularly eager to trace its genealogy back to Jefferson and the Founding Fathers of the American Republic. Paul Johnson and Niall Ferguson both insist that when independence was declared in North America, it was quickly followed by a vision of empire. Although these writers do not rest their entire case on this origin, it appears to be important for them to establish an imperial genealogy going back to the beginnings of American democracy. It may be presumed that connecting current imperial practice to the political philosophy of the 18th century in this way lends a definite legitimacy to the entire project. This does not mean that these writers unconditionally embrace American empire – indeed, both Ferguson and Maier predict that American imperialism faces serious and perhaps insurmountable obstacles – but it does allow them to discuss the notion as an inherently American, and therefore legitimate, phenomenon.

Thus, it is possible to perceive Boot’s, Paul Johnson’s and Ferguson’s attempts to trace the genealogy of American empire back to the nation’s birth as a part of a political and rhetorical project. The Bush administrations have struggled to acquire legitimacy for their forceful foreign policy and for remaining in Iraq despite the growing unpopularity of the war. With the discovery that Saddam Hussein did not possess Weapons of Mass Destruction, the only reason for remaining in Iraq is to stabilize the region. With the state of the nation deteriorating into civil war, this aim seems difficult, if not impossible, to achieve.

Boot and Ferguson come in handy here, presenting a different way of viewing the conflict. Boot assures his readers that there is no need to run away from the label American imperialism because America has been an empire since its inception. Ferguson and Paul Johnson second this claim by assuring likewise that the Founding Fathers themselves were ardent imperialists, and if that is so then there can certainly be no conflict between the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and current foreign policy.

Interestingly, some of those who resist the notion of American empire also look back to the 18th century, this time to disprove the notion that any connection between current American foreign policy and the beginning of the American Republic actually exists. To Ryn, Freedland, and Buchanan, the creation of the American Republic was essentially an indictment of imperialism. By taking this position, they are able to claim that the current phase of American foreign policy, begun during the Clinton era and intensified with the (neoconservative) reaction to 9/11, is essentially at odds with the American republican tradition. Sounding somewhat like a Supreme Court decision after having consulted the Constitution, Buchanan declares that America is “A Republic, Not an Empire”. In this way, these writers are reluctant to revise the traditional historical trajectory of the United States.

To return to Boot, Ferguson, and Paul Johnson, the fact that their revision of American history may be perceived as a part of a rhetorical project does not mean that they do not have a point when they say that America grew out of an imperialistic tradition and that current foreign policy can be traced back to this tradition. The United States was indeed a rather insignificant strip of land on the East Coast at the end of the Revolution. Some 50 years later, through a process that can really only be described as colonization, the nation stretched from sea to sea. Historian John Lewis Gaddis has explored this in his *Surprise,
Security, and the American Experience. In this book, he does not declare that America should embrace its imperial heritage, or even that such a heritage exists, but he does argue that principles of hegemony, unilateralism and pre-emption go back to the earliest days of the Republic. 59

This is also the position of many of those critical of the current state of American foreign policy. Chomsky and Chalmers Johnson are uninterested in the Founding Fathers as icons of American democracy, but they are not unwilling to trace American imperial practice back to the beginning of the Republic. Obviously, this is not in order to establish a principle by which current American foreign policy can be structured, but rather to investigate the relationship between the rise of American power and imperial practice and to speculate on the consequences of this practice.

Furthermore, like Boot, Ferguson, and Paul Johnson, these writers certainly have an agenda. Chomsky and Chalmers Johnson write their studies on American empire in an attempt to explain the dire consequences of American imperialism. To Chomsky, it is a matter of the survival of the human race, as he predicts Armageddon if the US does not come to its senses. To Chalmers Johnson and Michael Mann, the continuation of American empire will further a militarism that will rot the American Republic to the core, throw poorer nations into financial despair and eventually end American hegemony altogether.

Those who care less about the historical background still tend to second this warning. The early texts by Bacevich, along with International Relations scholars such as Odom and Dujarric, see the American invasions and occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq not necessarily as the beginning of American empire, but possibly as the beginning of its demise. Like Chomsky, Chalmers Johnson, and Michael Mann, they believe that these wars may eventually throw the US into financial chaos and military confusion. However, to Odom and Dujarric, the legitimacy of these wars has little to do with moral considerations. Instead, the end result of these invasions will determine whether they were politically wise or not. If the invasions manage to stabilize the region, Odom and Dujarric are happy to embrace them as good foreign policy. If they turn out to be catastrophic, however, they constitute no more than poor foreign policy.

Ultimately, political beliefs determine which position is taken in the struggle over America’s imperial past and future. But it is clear that, regardless of one’s political position, it makes limited sense to view American empire as a recent phenomenon arising as a consequence of 9/11 and the subsequent declaration of the War on Terror. Too many voices are claiming, for different reasons, that 9/11 was not so much the beginning of American imperialism, but instead an opportunity to re-think and re-theorize American historiography and current American foreign policy around the notion of empire. Imperial denial may be convenient for the servants of the US government, but it is hardly practical for any serious student of America’s historical past and political present.
NOTES

3. A "traditional empire" can be, and has been, defined in many different ways. From the perspective of this article, a useful, if not conclusive, definition of a traditional empire is a nation state which seeks to encourage and protect its international trade through imposing indefinite military and political control over other (recognized or unrecognized) states perceived as crucial to this trade.
9. Actually, those who today claim, in political, cultural and historical writing, that the United States has been pursuing global economic and military control beyond that which can be reasonably be pursued by a powerful nation state use slightly different terminologies to describe this pursuit. Some insist that the United States today constitutes an empire, for better or worse, and argue that the US practices both imperialism and colonialism; others prefer to label the United States a hegemony, suggesting that the power the United States exerts is indirect rather than direct. In addition to this, some use the two concepts synonymously, while still others use them as complimentary terms. As this paper aims to examine the new focus of American historical and political writing rather than the cultural impact of imperial practice on society, I concern myself primarily with those who employ the terms empire and imperialism. However, since hegemony and empire are sometimes used synonymously, and since there is no clear cut division between the two, I will sometimes refer to texts that use the concept of hegemony.
11. Freedland, as a representative of liberal anti-imperialist thinking, has produced a number of texts celebrating the democratic and liberal vitality of the United States. In *Bring Home the Revolution: The Case for a British Republic* (London: Fourth Estate, 1998) he suggests that Britain needs to be revitalized through the revolutionary ideals of the American founding fathers.
15. Whether the founding fathers of the United States were imperialists or not is an interesting question which, unfortunately, cannot be answered within the scope of this paper. Convincing arguments have been put forward by both sides of this debate. For those who wish to pursue this discussion, a thorough treatment of the matter is given in Gary Lawson’s *Constitution of Empire: Territorial Expansion and American Legal History* (New Haven, Yale UP, 2004).
17. This is explored in Edward Said’s final chapter of *Culture and Imperialism*. (London: Chatto & Windus, 1993).
21. Ibid., 15
22. Ibid.
25. Ibid., 23.
31. Ibid., 7.
32. Ibid., 208.
34. The Roosevelt Corollary, an extension of the Monroe Doctrine by President Theodore Roosevelt in 1904, essentially states that the United States has the right and obligation to interfere in the capacity of an international police force should it discover economic, political or military “chronic wrongdoing” within the nation states of the Western Hemisphere in general, and Central America and the Caribbean in particular.
38. Ibid.
40. Ibid.
43. Ibid., 10
44. Ibid.
45. Ibid.
46. Ibid., 2.
47. Ibid., 10.
48. Ibid., 33.
49. Wilson’s declaration in 1913 that the United States would only tolerate certain types of government and economic practices in Latin America is often seen as a further extension (indeed, corollary) to the 1904 Roosevelt Corollary.
50. Ibid., 204.
51. Ibid., 294
52. Ibid.
53. Ibid.
55. Ibid., 20.
56. Ibid., 294.
57. Ibid.

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