Dread and envy?
Debating Pax Americana
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“Two significant questions remain. First, is America currently an empire? Second, if it is not an empire, what is it?”

Following America’s wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, there has been an unexpected revival of the word ‘empire,’ which has moved from debates in bohemian coffeehouses to those in the loftier halls of academia and onto the pages of the nation’s prestigious journals. The word has largely lost the pejorative sense with which it has been used since the collapse of the European overseas empires; scholars and intellectuals debate the merits and demerits of the American imperium without blushing, as if there was no doubt about America’s imperial status. Council on Foreign Relations fellow Max Boot unabashedly called for an ‘American Empire’ during the Afghanistan war, and has since written of America’s need for a ‘colonial office’ to manage America’s foreign commitments. New York University Professor Niall Ferguson speaks of America as the successor to the British Empire, and chides Americans for failing to acknowledge and live up to the responsibilities inherent in empire; as he writes in the conclusion of his recent book _Empire_, “[America] is an empire, in short, that dare not speak its name. It is an empire in denial.” Similar arguments and equally passionate counterarguments appear regularly in _Foreign Affairs_, _Foreign Policy_, _The National Interest_ and other major magazines and newspapers, as well as several recent books. One such work is a collection of essays edited by Andrew Bacevich entitled _The Imperial Tense_, an attempt to crystallize the debate and indicate a transformation of America into an empire.

Despite the recent spate of commentary, however, it remains unclear whether the United States has crossed the threshold of empire. The burden of proof rests with those who insist on America’s imperial status. Oftentimes it seems that scholars are able to identify little aside from the absence of a second pole in the international system to show America to be an empire instead of a hegemon or superpower. The essays collected by Bacevich, while providing a panoramic view of the empire debate, do little to provide a clear-cut rationale for calling America an empire, and in the end raise more questions than they answer. This is the case despite a host of arguments affirming America’s imperial status; as Bacevich notes in the Introduction, “With a single exception, all the essays that follow accept the fact that by the beginning of the twenty-first century the United States, for better or worse, has become an imperial power.” Thus two significant questions remain. First, is America currently an empire? Second, if it is not an empire, what is it? The answers to these questions are of the utmost importance for determining the sustainability of America’s current international position and its relations with other states.

Those who argue that America in 2003 is already an empire, albeit an undeclared one, usually point to the features that have long undergirded American power. As such, their arguments tend to insist that America’s relative and absolute power in various areas, including military strength, economic strength and cultural attraction, have crossed some threshold past which a nation
automatically becomes an imperial power. Perhaps the most oft-repeated argument involves the amount of American defense spending and the breadth of its military commitments and deployments abroad. Ferguson noted in a debate with Robert Kagan at the American Enterprise Institute on July 17, 2003, “We know that roughly 750 military bases and installations exist under American servicemen in around 130 countries around the world. That is something like two-thirds of all the world’s countries. We know that the United States accounts now for roughly two-fifths, 40 percent, of all military expenditures in the world. In military terms...there never has been an empire as powerful as the United States today.” The numbers in fact underreport America’s military primacy, as they do not reveal America’s technological dominance in all areas and its unchallenged control of the seas and the skies. Should the United States continue to enjoy the across-the-board military supremacy it does today, it should have no trouble meeting the goal set by the 2002 National Security Strategy: “Our forces will be strong enough to dissuade potential adversaries from pursuing a military build-up in hopes of surpassing, or equaling, the power of the United States.”

In addition to its military primacy, the heralds of empire point to America’s equally stunning power in the global economy and in global culture as a confirmation of its imperial status. Since the Free-Market Revolution of the 1980s and the Information Revolution of the 1990s, America stands as the champion of a robust, freewheeling global capitalism, ruling as much on the basis of market power as on the strength of ideas embodied by the Washington Consensus. Together with multinationals and development economists comes American culture and the freedom it represents. In short, America is the world’s clearinghouse for political and economic liberalism, the hub from which all economic, political and cultural developments emanate. As Jedediah Purdy writes in his essay ‘Universal Nation,’ included in The Imperial Tense:

American economists supervise the policies of poor nations in debt to the IMF, and the U.S. economy every year presses its ethic of entrepreneurship and creative destruction deeper into Europe, East Asia, and India. American academics draft constitutions for new governments in Africa and central Asia, and Americans from George Soros’s Open Society Institute fund efforts to create local civil society. English is the world’s second language: 350 million people are native speakers, but more than a billion have learned enough to strike a bargain or argue about a basketball game. American culture is the other global second language—a shared patois whose vocabulary includes Michael Jordan’s face, the ragged beats of hip-hop music, and Baywatch, the world’s most popular television program.

This is Globalization as Americanization. To the heralds of empire, America uses these ‘soft’ channels to bend the peoples of the world to Washington’s will, entirely bypassing national governments powerless to stop their peoples from embracing these beneficial forces.

And yet, granting that these developments are true, one can still conclude that America has not yet become an empire. First, upon taking a closer look at the record, America appears to be merely ‘first among equals;’ it is an overwhelming first, but first nevertheless. Harvard Professor Joseph Nye’s vision of a multi-layered international system with different power distribution in each layer provides a subtler understanding of American power. Beyond its military dominance,
the United States hardly qualifies as an empire, let alone a hegemon, due to a multipolar international economy and a global society that increasingly empowers sub-national actors.

However, even if structural elements did not limit American power, America would still not be an empire, simply because America lacks the fundamental feature that defines empires throughout history: the will to rule. As Paul Johnson writes in *The New Criterion*, “[Empire’s] core meaning is ‘rule,’ with the implication ‘unqualified rule.’” America has little taste for commanding nations or for punishing nations for reasons beyond national security. American institutions reflect this reluctance to rule other nations; if America is, in fact, an empire, it must rank as the most dysfunctional in history. Instead of an all-powerful emperor, it has a president constrained by periodic elections, an extensive and uncontrollable bureaucracy and a constitution that divides power between the branches of government. Moreover, as Max Boot observed, it lacks a colonial office to skillfully manage its imperial holdings and, moreover, has no professional elite in jodhpurs and pith helmets to venture into the empire and man the lonely outposts of civilization. Most conclusively, rather than commanding a host of vassal states, the United States depends on democratic allies to achieve its strategic objectives, allies jealous of their sovereignty and willing to squeeze concessions from America in return for cooperation. Victor Davis Hanson writes in his contribution to Bacevich’s volume, “Imperial powers order and subjects obey. But in our case, we offer the Turks strategic guarantees, political support—and money—for their allegiance.” America as a world power lacks the ruthlessness towards both one’s friends—or, perhaps, ‘interests’—and one’s enemies necessary to maintain empire; while many varieties of empire have existed, including Britain’s liberal Victorian empire, ultimately an empire must be willing to crush opposition to its dominance. Had America possessed this brutality, American tanks would have rolled down the Champs Elysees when France disengaged from NATO, just as the Soviet Union crushed the Hungarian revolt of 1956. Instead, for a host of reasons, America, even as the greatest power that has ever been, often approaches other countries, particularly those that enjoy its protection, as a supplicant, six-shooters safely holstered.

Thus, in light of America’s reluctance to rule, one arrives at a more nuanced understanding of American power. America’s ‘un-imperial’ foreign policy, namely its unwillingness to rule, means that even as the United States launches a major global campaign to provide for its security, sending American armed forces to set up camp throughout the world, America remains a mere superpower, projecting its power solely to subvert its enemies. As Johnson notes, “In a globalized world the United States now has to anticipate its enemies, search out and destroy their bases, and disarm states likely to aid them. I call this defensive imperialism.” If ‘defensive imperialism’ is the sword, America’s enabling activities serve as the shield in its foreign policy, a role similar to that of the cold war. The United States, rather than dictating the form of government to which its friends and allies must adhere, enables countries to democratize in their own way with the assurance of American protection. Without another superpower to check its activities, America has less opposition to expanding this sphere of liberal democracy, whether through the use of force, as in Iraq (though probably not anywhere else for the time being), or by encouraging liberalization via the World Trade Organization, bilateral trade pacts or regional trade agreements, or through encouraging democratization by America’s allies in the Middle East and elsewhere in the developing world. As President George W. Bush said in his recent address at the National Endowment for Democracy, “Sixty years of Western nations excusing and accommodating the lack of freedom in the Middle East did nothing to make us safe—
because in the long run, stability cannot be purchased at the expense of liberty.” Thus America as enabler provides security for its people while measuring up to the nation’s role as ‘the last, best hope for mankind.’ It is a role that is distinctly anti-imperial, allowing countries that accept a basic code of conduct sovereignty that they would never enjoy in an empire, or, for that matter, in a world absent overwhelming American power. That is the promise of the unipolar era, and, should the United States go into decline, or shed its aversion to harsh, imperial rule, it will likely vanish, a fleeting respite from the conquest and bloodshed that has marked most of history. For the time being, America treads the line, perhaps a bit recklessly, but ultimately with confidence in the rightness of its actions. One can still hope that the United States, unlike its Britannic progenitor, will earn more than the dread and envy of the nations of the world.