

[none dare call it quagmire]

# *The Cost of Empire*

President Bush's war policy marks the beginning of the end of America's era of global dominance.

**By Christopher Layne**

THE ADMINISTRATION'S U-turn decision to ask for United Nations help in Iraq, and President George W. Bush's request that Congress appropriate \$87 billion to fund the occupation and reconstruction of that country send a very clear message: the administration's Iraq policy is a fiasco. And a foreseeable one at that.

U.S. intelligence agencies predicted that American troops occupying Iraq would not be welcomed as liberators but would be resisted. A pre-invasion State Department report warned that the administration had the proverbial snowball's chance of transforming Iraq into a Western-style democracy (a conclusion reinforced by a recent Zogby poll of Iraqis that found only 38 percent of Iraqis favor democracy, while 50 percent believe that "democracy is a western way of doing things and it will not work here"). Similarly, it was obvious that the administration's go-it-alone hubris, combined with its sledgehammer diplomacy, would chill Washington's relations with the other major pow-

ers and trigger a worldwide backlash of hostility toward the United States.

Those—here and abroad—who opposed Washington's reckless march to war can say we told you so. But that is not the point. More than that, it is necessary to step back from day-to-day events and place the Iraq war in the context of its longer-term significance for the United States. A good place to start is by asking why the administration embarked on war while ignoring widespread—and accurate—predictions that even a successful military campaign could lead to postwar disaster. In other words, what were the administration's war aims?

We know what they were not. Iraq was not an imminent threat to the security of the Middle East and Persian Gulf. (Did anyone say "weapons of mass destruction"?) And—the administration's manipulation of public opinion notwithstanding—Saddam Hussein was not involved in Sept. 11 and was not in bed with al-Qaeda. But, as both U.S. and British intelligence warned, by going to war with Iraq, the administration has

created a terrorist threat where none existed previously, making the U.S. less, not more, secure than it would have been had we not invaded Iraq.

The real reason the administration went to war had nothing to do with terrorism. Indeed, many of the administration's architects of illusion—Paul Wolfowitz, Douglas Feith, and Richard Perle, among others—put Iraq squarely in their geopolitical crosshairs while they were out of power during the 1990s. The administration went to war in Iraq to consolidate America's global hegemony and to extend U.S. dominance to the Middle East by establishing a permanent military stronghold in Iraq for the purposes of controlling the Middle Eastern oil spigot (thereby giving Washington enormous leverage in its relations with Western Europe and China); allowing Washington to distance itself from an increasingly unreliable and unstable Saudi Arabia; and using the shadow of U.S. military power to bring about additional regime changes in Iran and Syria.

It is fashionable to say that 9/11—and

the subsequent war with Iraq—“changed everything.” But this is not true. Before Sept. 11 the biggest debate among students of international politics and analysts of U.S. foreign policy was about American hegemony. Re-christened as a debate about the wisdom of American empire, it still is. The big fault line in this debate is over which of two theories—yes, academic theories about international relations really do reflect and influence real-world policy—about how states can best attain security for themselves in the competitive arena of world politics is correct.

“Offensive realism” holds that the best way for a state to gain security is to amass overwhelming power—that is, by becoming a hegemon. In plain English, being a hegemon means being like Leroy Brown—badder than old King Kong and meaner than a junkyard dog. A hegemon can use its power to eliminate rivals—by conquering them, co-opting them, or intimidating them—and seek to create a congenial world order that reflects its own ideology, values, and preferences. Since World War II, offensive realism has undergirded American grand strategy, although the current administration’s policy is offensive realism on steroids.

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If the Duchess of Windsor had been an administration strategist she would have said that the U.S. can never be too rich, too powerful—or too well-armed or too willing to employ force against its adversaries.

Hegemony is a superficially appealing grand strategy. After all, if power counts in international politics—and every real-

ist knows it counts big time—then it seemingly makes sense for the U.S. to grab as much power as possible.

Traditional realists like Hans Morgenthau, George Kennan, and Walter Lippman reject the logic of offensive realism because they believe that when one state becomes too powerful all the others fear for their security. They respond by building up their own military capabilities or by forming alliances with others to act as a counterweight against a hegemon’s power (or both). This is what students of international politics refer to as “balancing.” And, indeed, the historical record pretty conclusively shows that hegemony is a self-defeating grand strategy, not a winning one. Every hegemonic aspirant in modern international history—the Hapsburg Empire under Charles V, Spain under Philip II, France under Louis XIV and Napoleon, and Germany under Hitler—has been defeated by counter-hegemonic balancing.

American policymakers have come up with a number of (far too) clever rationales to convince themselves that the U.S. will escape the fate that invariably befalls hegemons. For example, they claim that the United States is a dif-

ferent kind of hegemon—a “benign” or “benevolent” one that is non-threatening because it acts altruistically in international politics and because others are attracted to America’s “soft power” (its political institutions and values, and its culture). There is no reason, they say, for others to balance against the United States. Other proponents of American

hegemony take a different tack: they claim that the United States can throw its hegemonic weight around as it pleases because its power—economic, military, and technological—is so overwhelming that it will be a very long time before other states can even think about balancing against the U.S.

These are not compelling arguments. In international politics, benevolent hegemons are like unicorns—there are no such animals. Hegemons love themselves, but others mistrust and fear them. Others dread both the over-concentration of geopolitical weight in America’s favor and the purposes for which it may be used. Washington’s (purportedly) benevolent intentions are ephemeral, but the hard fist of American power is tangible—and others worry that if U.S. intentions change, they might get smacked. As for the argument that the U.S. is too mighty to be counter-balanced, history reminds us that things change fast in international politics. The British found out toward the end of the 19th century that a seemingly unassailable international power position can melt away with unexpected rapidity.

Perhaps the proponents of America’s imperial ambitions are right and the U.S. will not suffer the same fate as previous hegemonic powers. Don’t bet on it. The very fact of America’s overwhelming power is bound to produce a geopolitical backlash—which is why it’s only a short step from the celebration of imperial glory to the recession of imperial power. Indeed, on its present course, the United States seems fated to succumb to the “hegemon’s temptation.” Hegemons have lots of power and because there is no countervailing force to stop them, they are tempted to use it repeatedly, and thereby overreach themselves. Over time, this hegemonic muscle-flexing has a price. The cumulative costs of fighting—or preparing to fight—guerilla wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, asymmetric



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conflicts against terrorists (in the Philippines, possibly in a failed Pakistan, and elsewhere), regional powers (Iran, North Korea), and rising great powers like China could erode America's relative power—especially if the U.S. suffers setbacks in future conflicts, for example in a war with China over Taiwan.

At the end of the day, hegemonic decline results from a combination of external and internal factors: over-extension abroad (imperial overstretch) and domestic economic weakness (endless budget and balance-of-payments deficits). It comes as no surprise that the imperial overstretch debate of the late 1980s—about the costs of empire and America's ability to afford them—which was aborted by the Soviet Union's sudden collapse, has re-emerged with a vengeance. And there is ample reason to

worry about whether the U.S. can sustain the burdens of hegemony. A recent report commissioned by the U.S. Treasury Department, but buried by the Bush administration, pointed out the magnitude of the fiscal crisis confronting the U.S. in funding health care and pension commitments to the rapidly aging "baby boom" generation. As Niall Ferguson and Laurence Kotlikoff suggest in an important article in the Fall 2003 issue of the *National Interest*, the looming imperative of achieving fiscal solvency through a combination of painful tax increases and spending cuts eventually will spur the realization that America's imperial ambitions are unaffordable. Over time, America's fiscal troubles will erode its economic power—which is the foundation of its military might—and, as the relative

power gap between the U.S. and potential new great powers begins to shrink, the costs and risks of challenging the United States will decrease and the payoff for doing so will increase.

American policymakers should want to avoid the fate of hegemons. In the late 1890s, Great Britain—widely regarded as at the zenith of its hegemonic power—had its own counterpart to American unilateralism: splendid isolation. But as speculation grew that the other European great powers would form a coalition to balance against Britain, London realized its isolation was far from splendid. As the British military analyst Spencer Wilkinson said the time, "We have no friends, and no nation loves us." A recent *New York Times* article on other nations' perceptions of the U.S. suggests that it is not

much of a leap to conclude that, because of its hegemonic strategy, the U.S. risks facing the nightmare scenario depicted by Wilkenson.

The administration, however, is not worried because it believes that American hegemony is an unchallengeable fact of international life. But this does not hold up because the rest of the world draws the opposite conclusion: that the United States is too powerful, and its hegemony must be resisted. The administration has dug the U.S. into a deep hole in Iraq and, more worryingly, in terms of its relations with the rest of the world. So, what is to be done?

Realists have tried to do something. Nearly every major realist scholar of international politics in the U.S. opposed going to war with Iraq. No surprise here. During Vietnam, realists like Kennan, Morgenthau, and Kenneth Waltz were among the first—and most prescient—in warning that the war would become a quagmire that would undermine, rather than further, U.S. interests.

While understanding the ineluctable role of power in international politics, realists also understand that military force is a blunt instrument and that its use often has unforeseeable consequences. While understanding that unilateralism is the default strategic option for great

imperial ambitions, a new group called the Coalition for a Realistic Foreign Policy is organizing to push for a more prudent U.S. strategy. Composed of leading realist scholars from academe, think-tank analysts, and mainstream members of the political establishment, the

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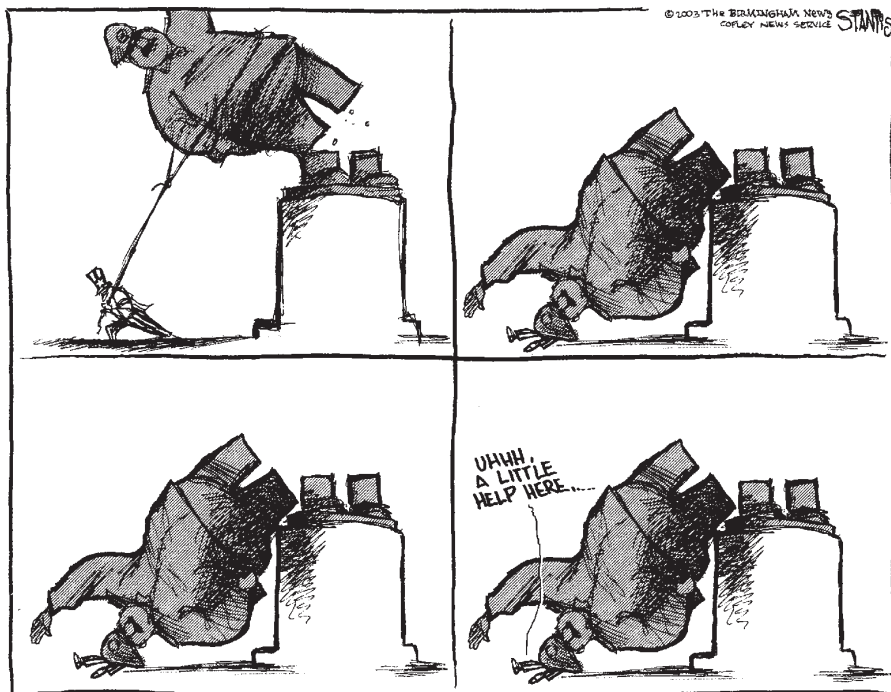
powers, realists also know that, when possible, it is best to work with others (especially in the real war on terrorism, which cannot be won by the U.S. without the co-operation of other states). Realists also know that it is foolish to antagonize other states needlessly or to destroy institutional frameworks of co-operation through which the U.S. can work with others to advance its own interests.

Now that the Iraqi debacle has underscored the risks of the administration's

Coalition is a group that transcends partisan and ideological divides. It is united by the "desire to turn American national security policy toward realistic and sustainable measures for protecting U.S. vital interests in a manner that is consistent with American values." Perhaps as the 2004 presidential campaign unfolds, someone like a Howard Dean or a Wesley Clark will recognize the virtue of reaching across party lines to staff a foreign-policy team dedicated to reconstructing American foreign policy on a sounder, non-imperial basis.

One thing is certain: unless the call for the United States to exercise self-imposed grand-strategic restraint is heeded, the rest of the world will act to impose that constraint on Washington. If that happens, the Bush administration will not be remembered for conquering Baghdad but rather for a policy that shattered the pillars of the international security framework that the United States established after World War II, galvanized both hard and soft balancing against U.S. hegemony, and marked the beginning of the end of America's era of global preponderance. For this, it must be held accountable. ■

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# I Was Wrong

A repentant warblogger sheaths his sword.

By Jack Strocchi

HAVE YOU EVER made a universal and eternal fool of yourself? The Internet offers wonderful opportunities to immortalize intellectual folly. My recent chastening experience as a pro-war blogger has made me realize that I am not cut out to offer strategic advice to statesmen. The worrying thing is that this advice applies equally to the current folk who hold those positions.

Before I join the orgy of recriminations at the Bush administration for leading us into the Iraqi flytrap, I must first engage in a bit of self-flagellation. I have been well and truly conned, by my dumb self and devious others, about the second Gulf War's economy of means and attainability of ends. The war was built on a series of falsehoods, propagated by neocon-artists and swallowed by Suckers R Us.

The best lies are laced with a tincture of truth, so I must concede that the war did generate some bright spots. Hussein & Sons were run out of power—almost. It appears that Saddam is still pulling the strings somewhere around the Sunni Triangle. The cities of Basra and Baghdad are enjoying municipal democracy—sort of. The U.S. is not happy with the tendency of Iraqis to elect fundamentalist clerics and is instead handpicking administrators. Iraqi oil fields are being developed for Iraqi civic benefit—but not quite yet. A *Washington Post* headline gloomily proclaimed, "Iraq Is Ill-Equipped to Exploit Huge Oil Reserves."

Figuring out a well-intentioned plan is one thing. Making it work is another,

and judged by this standard, the invasion and occupation of Iraq can now be considered a failure. Witness Jack Straw, Britain's foreign secretary whose pull-no-punches report to Tony Blair concluded: we are at risk of strategic failure in Iraq.

This late-breaking wisdom is a good sign, but I fear the Owl of Minerva has already had its wings clipped.

It is now clear that, far from promoting U.S. strategic objectives, the Bush administration has actually gone backwards on stated war aims.

There was no Islamist problem in Iraq before, but there is one now. Rather than deterring fundamentalist terrorism, occupying another Holy Land has effectively launched a U.S.-sponsored recruiting drive for Islamic terrorists. Elements of the terrorist organization Ansar al-Islam have moved into Baghdad, Islamic jihadists were infiltrating

that disarmament leads to a war." America's postwar woes have strengthened North Korea's bargaining position to the extent that we now have to enlist our old adversary, the People's Republic of China, in an attempt to keep the Axis of Evil from spinning off a wheel.

The postwar period has also failed to create a new "dynamic of peace" in the Middle East, although it has added some exciting new forms of civil instability. Palestinians have not been impressed with U.S.-backed regime changes. The attempt to banish Arafat, their long-time leader, has made them quite cross. They have started their suicide bombings again, and the chief navigator for the road map to peace has quit in disgust.

The U.S. also made a few ... process errors in its preamble to the war. It's hard to fight international terrorism when one treats allies with contempt by launching a pre-emptive war, which sets

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Iraq from Syria, and some of these folks were probably behind the various car bombings that have enlivened urban Iraq over the past few months.

There were no WMD found in Iraq, but WMD proliferation continues apace at the other end of the evil axis. Pyongyang's state-run newspaper pointed out the obvious truth, "The Iraqi war proved

a bad military precedent; lying about WMD, which destroys public trust in a democracy; sidestepping the UN Security Council, which mocks international law; and trashing Old European allies, which disables security alliances. All these things may turn around, or somehow magically fix themselves, although I doubt it.