An Empire, If You Can Bear It

by Justin Raimondo

> *"The mission of the United States is one of benevolent assimilation."*
> —William McKinley

Blowback: The Costs and Consequences of American Empire
by Chalmers Johnson
New York: Metropolitan Books;
268 pp., $26.00

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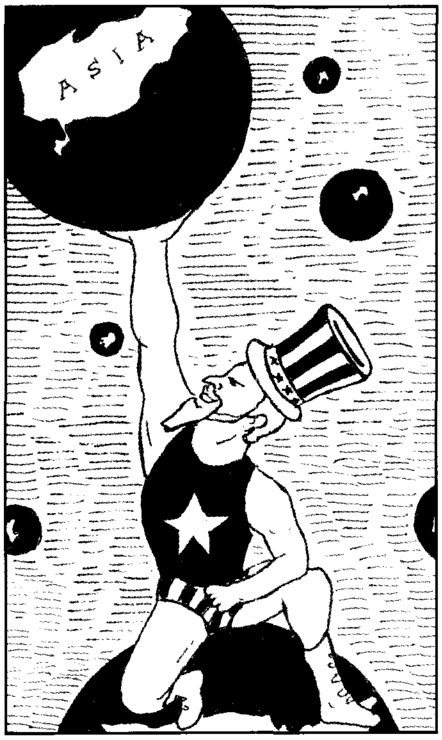
In his classic study of "isolationism," *Not to the Swift*, Justus Doenecke takes note of a phenomenon called "Asia Firstism"—the view of conservative politicians and publicists of the postwar era who opposed meddling in Europe but saw Asia as the equivalent of the long-vanished American frontier and the East as the natural sphere of American expansionism. In the postwar world, the old America Firsters "concentrated less and less upon withdrawal from the world's passions and battles, and more and more upon the most hazardous commitments on the Asian continent." Today, a new crop of Asia Firsters opposes U.S. intervention in the Balkans but considers the military occupation of Japan, South Korea, and Okinawa as vital to American interests. Vladimir Putin is a pussycat, but the "Chicoms," in these circles, are a rising challenge to American hegemony that must be "contained."



Bill Subik

In the 1950's, as the Cold War delivered the conservative movement to the tender mercies of various ex-communist and pseudo-Trotskyist charlatans, a tiny minority retained the old faith. Doenecke recounts that, even at the height of the Cold War hysteria, "genuine outsiders" like Lawrence Dennis, Harry Elmer Barnes, Garet Garrett, and precious few others "called in vain for a return to a more consistent and cautious ideology." Garrett, wondered aloud: "How could we lose China or Europe, since they never belonged to us?" The question was drowned out by the strident Cold War chorus and was not to be asked again for half a century. Now that the Cold War is over, Chalmers Johnson has raised this question with renewed urgency in a book that is the perfect antidote for present-day Asia Firstism.

In 1952, Garrett opined that, by the time we discover our republic has become an empire, "it may be already too late to do anything about it. That is to say, a time comes when Empire finds itself a prisoner of history." There is the same sense of irony and self-inflicted tragedy in Johnson's indictment of American globalism. "Many may, as a start, find it hard to believe that our place in the world even adds up to an empire," he writes:

> But only when we come to see our country as both profiting from and trapped within the structures of an empire of its own making will it be possible for us to explain a great many elements of the world that otherwise perplex us.

Johnson, president of the Japan Policy Research Institute, begins by considering the ugly spectacle of imperial America in Okinawa, painting a vivid portrait of the island as an exploited outpost of empire, where rape, robbery, and traffic accidents involving U.S. military personnel surpass the crime rates of our own inner cities. Chapters on Indonesia, the two Koreas, China, and Japan reinforce the overarching theme of "blowback," succinctly summed up in the biblical injunction that "as ye sow so ye shall reap." "Blowback" refers both to terrorist attacks on U.S. military bases and other targets abroad and to the (not so) long-range economic and political consequences of imperial overstretch. In this ambitious book, Johnson presents the outlines of a non-Marxist theory of American imperialism: "Marx and Lenin were mistaken about the nature of imperialism," he says:

> It is not the contradictions of capitalism that lead to imperialism but imperialism that breeds some of the more important contradictions of capitalism. When these contradictions ripen, as they must, they create devastating economic crises.

In fact, the Cold War distorted the global economy and hollowed out America's industrial base, leading to bad investments in our East Asian satellites and

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Justin Raimondo writes from San Francisco.

their subsequent overcapacity. Japan is a case in point. During the Cold War, the country's strategic value outweighed—in the eyes of U.S. political leaders and economic planners—its growing role as an economic competitor. Americans provided open access to their markets without demanding reciprocity, while the Japanese supinely accepted their role as a eunuch state, disarmed but kept fat and happy by their American overlords. As a "developmental state," along with the other Asian "tigers," Japan created its own variety of mercantilist capitalism, a "third way" between the socialism of the Soviet bloc and "laissez-faire," American style. This Nipponese third way, however, was not an ideological alternative, but the survival mechanism of a defeated people. Japanese industrial policy, guided by a permanent and unelected bureaucracy, was geared to serve the interests of producers, not consumers. Giant cartels, or *zaibatsu*, stood at the apex of an export-driven economy, churning out inexpensive manufactured goods for the U.S. market while making their own people pay ten times the world market price for their primary food staple, rice. Other Asian states, huddled under the U.S. defense umbrella, followed the Japanese example. Imperialism distorted the normal development of these nations and made them economically dependent on their political and—especially—their military relationship with the United States.

This peculiar form of imperial symbiosis had a debilitating effect on both America and Japan: It led to the de-industrialization of America as well as a great deal of Japanese malinvestment. In America, the deterioration of the steel, auto, and other heavy industries created the Rust Belt, slashing the ranks of working-class families; in Japan, MITI economic planners manipulated the controls of their industrial-policy machine, reducing interest rates to zero percent, and creating an economic bubble that burst in 1998, when Japan plunged into recession. MITI's economic planners, rather than undertake needed reforms—which would have meant the wholesale restructuring of the Japanese economy—fell back on what they knew: They would export their way out of their predicament. Resisting pressures to open their markets to American goods, the Japanese continued to develop the fine art of economic warfare behind a wall of protective tariffs, taxes, and other barriers to trade. In negotiations with the U.S. government, the Japanese held the trump card: Did the Americans want the suddenly impoverished Japanese holders of U.S. government securities to convert their assets into cash? This would be perhaps the most destabilizing form of blowback possible: the bursting of the American bubble and the beginning of a worldwide economic meltdown.

Here is the true meaning of globalization: The United States is being held hostage by its own satellites, a prisoner of history as well as of the hubris of its leaders. Johnson's powerful thesis is that we are bound to buckle under the burden of empire; it is only a matter of time before the American Empire goes the way of its Roman, British, and Soviet predecessors.

From Johnson's perspective, the case of South Korea is especially illuminating—and newsworthy, as we witness the rise of a new Korean nationalism and the momentum of reunification threatening to erase borders, political structures, and interstate alliances born at the height of the Cold War. Johnson compares the Kwangju uprising of 1980 to the suppression of the Hungarian revolution of 1956, the difference being that the Soviets used their own troops while we depended on our South Korean surrogates. When a South Korean general in 1980 headed off democratic elections with a coup and imposed martial law, student protesters in Kwangju were bayoneted by elite South Korean military forces who had been withdrawn from the DMZ with more than tacit U.S. consent. Johnson, quoting recently released cables to and from the American ambassador to South Korea, William J. Gleysteen, shows that the United States coordinated the bloody suppression of the Kwangju rebellion as surely as the Kremlin planted its jackboot on the neck of Imre Nagy and the Hungarian revolutionaries. During the Cold War, South Korea had no more choice to opt out of its military alliance with the United States than the nations of the Warsaw Pact were free to leave the Soviet bloc.

The inability to escape the "protection" of American hegemony is even more pronounced in the post-Cold War era, when there is nothing to protect South Korea against except the accelerating implosion of North Korea's communist regime. As South Korean President Kim Dae Jung holds up the promise of reunification as an achievable goal, the lords of the New World Order are getting nervous. In April 1997, Secretary of Defense William Cohen declared in a visit to Seoul that American troops would remain stationed on the peninsula even if North and South Korea were reunified—a statement that was met at the time with widespread shock, not only by the Chinese but by the South Koreans, who increasingly view the GIs in their midst as more of a threat than North Korea's million-man army.

Johnson's account of the origins and development of South Korea as a U.S. client state emphasizes the underlying current of Korean nationalism that is just now breaking through to the surface. Gen. Park Chung-hee's *coup d'etat* of 1961 ushered in a decade of what appeared to be coordination between Washington and Seoul. General Park, however, had observed the fate of America's South Vietnamese client, and he was aware that South Korea needed to go it alone by acquiring nuclear weapons. South Korea launched a nuclear-weapons program that was supposed to bear radioactive fruit in 1985—but Park was assassinated before the project got off the ground. (It was, of course, a coincidence that his assassin was South Korea's chief of intelligence, Kim Jae-kyu, who just happened to be Park's main liaison with Washington. The two were having dinner, and sometime between the appetizers and the drinks Kim pulled out a pistol, shot Park in the head, and wounded a bodyguard. The official story is that he did it to protest "repression against the people"—a repression implemented by the commander of Park's political police, the assassin himself.)

The same military and political establishment that insists on maintaining indefinitely our Cold War "forward" stance on the Korean peninsula as a permanent obstacle to Korean reunification also sees China as an emerging threat to American hegemony that must be either "engaged" or "contained"—never adjusted to. The irony, Johnson points out, is that a united Korea could provide a regional counterbalance to this alleged Chinese threat. The author's assessment of China reflects his view of Asia's developing capitalist countries—Taiwan, South Korea, Singapore, and even Japan—as "soft" authoritarian states which, while nominally democratic, are actually governed with varying degrees of popular participation and consent by unelected bureaucrats.

China, where the media is openly controlled by the state, is an example of "soft totalitarianism"; Johnson contrasts the Chinese system with the Japanese model of speech control, where

> such freedoms exist on paper but are attenuated in part by cartelization of the news media—press clubs in Japan can impose collective or individual penalties on journalists who report news that irritates the state.

Elections are formally held under both systems, with China's soft totalitarians using police methods to ensure the outcome and Japan's soft authoritarian regime achieving its ends "through peer pressure, bullying, fear of ostracism, giving priority to group norms, and eliciting conformity through social sanctions of various kinds."

Under both types of government, elections are mere formalities; economic reforms in China have further blurred the differences between the "socialist" and "capitalist" wings of developing Asia. Beneath the thin veneer of ideology, the underlying character of the various national cultures shapes the social and political evolution of the Asian tigers, and also of that giant mastodon, China. Johnson argues that "the real economic model for mainland China, although never mentioned for all the obvious reasons, is undoubtedly neither Japan nor South Korea but Taiwan" under the Nationalists, where thriving state-party enterprises generate half the nation's wealth. Left to themselves, Johnson suggests, China and Taiwan could achieve a peaceful conclusion to their family feud—a possibility that once seemed more likely than the prospect of Korean reunification.

The Cold War ended, but the Americans did not go home; instead, they stayed to guard the frontiers of empire against an enemy that has long since vanished. More than that, they launched a new holy war—actually, a series of "humanitarian" interventions in tandem with an ideological campaign to impose "free market democracy" on the rest of the world.

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With American hegemony in the military realm assured, and the public largely unaware of its government's machinations,

> government officials, economic theorists, and members of the Wall Street-Treasury Complex launched an astonishingly ambitious, even megalomaniacal attempt to make the rest of the world adopt American economic institutions and norms. One could argue that the project reflected the last great expression of eighteenth-century Enlightenment rationalism, as idealistic and utopian as the paradise of pure communism that Marx envisioned.

This megalomania is reflected in what Srdja Trifkovic has called the Clinton Doctrine, which commits the United States to the global eradication of "racism" and "ethnic intolerance," even if it means invading every country on earth to do so—militarily, as in Kosovo, but also by launching coordinated economic attacks on the currencies of targeted nations, such as Indonesia, Thailand, and Malaysia. "Although there is no evidence that Washington hatched a conspiracy to extend the scope of its global hegemony," writes Johnson, "a sense of moral superiority on the part of some and of opportunism on the part of others more than sufficed to create a similar effect."

Not all of Johnson's policy prescriptions are sound—"managed trade" is what we have *now*—but it is hard to take issue with his analysis of militarized state capitalism as the logical outcome of an imperialistic foreign policy. His critique of Western capitalism as no less cartelized than the *zaibatsu* of Japan is sharp at times, as when Johnson notes disdainfully the "crony capitalism" that enabled the government bailout of Long-Term Capital Management, a huge hedge fund headed by former Federal Reserve Vice Chairman David W. Mullins. As the International Monetary Fund goes on the rampage in the Far East, destroying national economies and turning crises into catastrophes, Johnson acerbically notes that "globalization seems to boil down to the spread of poverty to every country except the United States."

While there is much talk these days of "rogue states" and what to do about them, the real problem, as Johnson shows, is that the world is currently afflicted by a "rogue superpower"—the United States of America. Lecturing, threatening, and overtly seeking to overthrow any regime that fails to bow before American hegemony, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright travels the world braying about the virtues of "democracy" and "free markets." In February 1998, explaining why it was necessary to launch cruise missiles against Iraq, she went into one of her trademark tirades. "If we have to use force, it is because we are America," she bawled. "We are the indispensable nation. We stand tall. We see farther into the future."

In reality, Albright & Company see no further than the next election, the next indictment, or the next big campaign contribution from a major weapons contractor. Like such Old Right critics of the warfare state as John T. Flynn, Johnson regards the arms lobby and an ever-growing military establishment as "the indispensable instrument for maintaining the American empire." We have won a post-Cold War arms race with "no other participants" for the purpose of appeasing the voracious appetite of an American military machine that has become autonomous: an imperial Praetorian Guard armed with thermonuclear weapons and awaiting its Caesar.

The consequences of the Cold War, Johnson predicts, will linger well into the 21st century, the history of which will amount in large part to blowback from the 20th. Only an awareness among American citizens of the crisis of empire can hope to avert or at least ameliorate it. Our leaders believe that,

> if so much as one overseas American base is closed or one small country is allowed to manage its own economy, the world will collapse. . . . [T]hey might better ponder the creativity and growth that would be unleashed if only the United States would relax its suffocating embrace.

Facilis Discensus Averno

by Chilton Williamson, Jr.

From Dawn to Decadence:
500 Years of Western Cultural Life,
From 1500 to the Present
by Jacques Barzun
New York: HarperCollins;
877 pp., $36.00

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Jacques Barzun's 30-somethingth book, though published by HarperCollins, bears the unmistakable stamp of Columbia University, from whose college the author graduated, where he was appointed Seth Low Professor of History, and served for ten years as dean of faculties and provost. I refer, of course, to the college's once renowned, now démodé, Western Civilization program: a four-semester course of lectures and readings, mostly from a hefty two-volume work published by Columbia University Press, required of all candidates for the Bachelor of Arts degree. As a graduate of Columbia College, I consider myself the beneficiary, as well as the survivor, of a curriculum that gave the student the illusion (at least) of having Read All the Books, while making up in some part for the generally disappointing level of undergraduate instruction that prevailed in the college. (In fact, the reading lists for *all* courses at Columbia were comprehensively superb—a boon for a student temperamentally impatient, then as now, at being lectured at; who admires the sound of the human voice in the opera house rather than in the lecture hall and is incapable of concentrating on intellectual communication whose medium is something other than the PRINTED word.) Next after Western Civ, perhaps, Columbia is famous for its School of Journalism, the first institution of its kind. While I came to the journalistic profession (the phrase is obviously an oxymoron) by another route, I have not been immune subsequently to its primary occupational hazard: the philistinism that substitutes the Somali peacekeeping operation for the Peloponnesian War; the Republic of Haiti for the Republic of Venice; Martin Luther King, Jr., for Martin Luther; William Safire for Dr. Johnson; Bill Clinton for Muhammad, Don Juan, and the Marquis de Sade. Professor Barzun's book, with its essentially pedagogical approach to its subject, its textbook layout and highlighted quotations, took me back a few years to a formative and somewhat more humble period in my intellectual career, and yet I cannot say I resented the experience; rather, I welcomed and enjoyed it. If every working journalist read *From Dawn to Decadence* this year, the result might (just perhaps) amount to a small Enlightenment, however ephemeral, on the American Grub Street. The young (practitioners in their 20's and 30's) could finally learn something about the dead elephant they've been so courageously kicking since leaving school, while their elders, aged in the 40's, 50's, and 60's—the last generation of Americans who can fairly be said to have had an education—would experience a refresher course, the more enjoyable for not requiring an examination at the end of it. Reading Barzun's book, I felt myself a living example of the truth of Dr. Johnson's dictum that men more often need to be reminded than instructed.

In Jacques Barzun's conception, the past five centuries of Western civilization that constitute the modern era are divided into four great revolutionary movements—the religious, the monarchical, the liberal-philosophical, and the social—whose impress affects the present powerfully and all of which conduce to a single end, which is decadence. Barzun is quick to remind the reader that the word indicates a falling off, not stoppage or total ruin:

> It implies in those who live in such a time no loss of energy or talent or moral sense. On the contrary it is a very active time, full of deep concerns, but peculiarly restless, for it sees no clear lines of advance. The loss it faces is that of Possibility. The forms of art as of life seem exhausted, the stages of development have been run through. Institutions function painfully. Repetition and frustration are the intolerable result. . . . [T]he upshot is a floating hostility to things as they are.

Almost in the same breath, however, he speaks of demise, which he argues to be the result of the West's pressing its most characteristic purposes to their utmost conclusions. ("This ending is shown by the deadlocks of our time: for and against nationalism, for and against individualism, for and against the high arts, for and against strict morals and religious belief.") These purposes, which Barzun perceives as the overriding cultural themes suggested by "continuity in aims" over half a millennium, are accorded similar status in his book, where they appear always in capital letters:

RECEIVED WISDOM

2006: The Chautauqua Rising by Jack Cashill (Dunkirk, NY: Olin Frederick, Inc.; 273 pages, $22.95)

I picked up Jack Cashill's political suspense novel, *2006: The Chautauqua Rising*, because it is set in the grapy southwest of New York State. I didn't put it down until I had finished it, long after midnight.

Cashill's rebels rise from the western fringe of Upstate New York's Burned-Over District, where a century and a half ago ragged prophets and holy fools tramped the land preaching every sort of revolution. His "constitutionalist underground" dream team of Seneca Indians, Amish, hill people, Latin Mass Catholics, a sportswriter, and a beautiful folksinger match wits and muscle with the homicidal careerists who would seize their guns and shut down their homeschools. If this sounds drearily didactic, it isn't. The novel is fast-paced and genuinely suspenseful, and its conclusion is an utterly implausible hoot.

Tinted by local color, animated by righteous (and condign) outrage, *2006: The Chautauqua Rising* is a page-turner with its heart in the right place.

—Bill Kauffman