

by Samuel Francis

The Empire's New Clothes

Not the least of the several noticeable ironies that attend the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st is that, when the logically appropriate moment for the declaration of a formal American Empire arrived during the half-century of conflict with the Soviet Union, the empire failed to emerge. Today, well after any reasonable excuse we might have had for conquering the world has passed into the same graveyard as the Iron Curtain and the Un-American Activities Committee, the global imperium of the United States is virtually upon us. Liberals and neoconservatives who bleat tearfully over the spread of democracy and human rights across the planet invoke, at the same time, the need, the duty, and even the virtue of using the American military to clobber dissenters into submission. Interviewed in the *American Conservative* last fall, Norman Mailer mentioned that he had failed to understand the rationale behind the projected war on Iraq until he read an opinion column in the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* that proclaimed the necessity of the United States conquering the world. Not long before, an issue of the *Atlantic* sported several articles suggesting that the United States occupy Iraq permanently and one (by Jimmy Carter's one-time aide James Fallows) proposing that we make Iraq the 51st state. Of course, the neocons agree (except when they are intimating that all Arab peoples should simply be exterminated), and hardly a week expires in which the *Weekly Standard*, *National Review*, the *Wall Street Journal* editorial page, or the *Washington Times* commentary section does not demand that the United States seize or obliterate one hapless country or another. *Empire*, once as nasty a term in the lexicon of the left as *free enterprise* and *security risk*, has suddenly become respectable again.

The rehabilitation of the imperial mission began well before the current unpleasantness in the Middle East; I first became aware of it while reviewing a book by the late Lewis Feuer titled *Imperialism and the Anti-Imperialist Mind* (1986). Professor Feuer, a sociologist and a respected professional scholar of Marx and Hegel, actually had good things to say

about at least some kinds of imperialism well before it became fashionable to do so. In his book, he distinguishes between what he calls "regressive" and "progressive" imperialism. The latter is "founded on a cosmopolitan view of man, a conception of human worth to be found among all men," and leads "to what might we might characterize as a 'participatory imperialism'":

A Spaniard, a Gaul, or Greek might, under the [progressive Roman] Empire, if he possessed the necessary talent, rise to the highest grades of the military or civil service, or even become Emperor. A progressive imperialism elevates living standards and cultural life; it brings education and the arts to its more backward areas. It establishes a universal rule of law and security of person.

Mr. Feuer's examples of "progressive imperialism" include the empires of Alexander the Great, the Romans, the British, the French (under Napoleon), and the Dutch, not to mention the current American Empire. "Regressive imperialism," on the other hand,

is characterized by an animus against the rational culture of civilization. It is, as such, a form of rebellion, an anti-civilizational movement, an uprising energized by aggressive drives against cultural constraints. Genocidal behavior appears to be specifically characteristic of the imperialism of regressive societies, and has been so in our own time.

Examples include the imperialism of the German National Socialists, the Spaniards, the Mongols, and the Soviets. If it is not already apparent, Mr. Feuer makes perfectly clear in the third chapter of his book that the treatment of the Jewish people by a particular empire is a test of its kind of imperialism. Those that he lumps into the "progressive" type tended to be philosemitic (the Romans, at least at certain times, were marginal in this re-



gard), while the "regressive" empires all treated Jews quite meanly—the Nazis, obviously so; the Spaniards, because they either expelled or insisted on converting or persecuting the Jews; and the Mongols, because they exterminated Jews and just about everyone else in their path.

What Professor Feuer accomplished in his book was to redecorate the cake of imperialism to make it palatable to the liberal left. So far from serving the interests and passions of Colonel Blimps, crusading missionaries, and vulgar jingoists, imperialism can be, in Feuer's view, an instrument of social and political progress. The "cosmopolitanism" it carries serves to subvert traditional institutions, identities, and values and to open the gates to "talent," even to the point of becoming emperor. Although he does not quite make the point explicitly, it is pretty clear that, in his view, what really determines which kind of imperialism develops is whether Jews are prominent in running it and gaining from it, and the prospect of countering antisemitism (as well as other forms of ethnic discrimination) is yet another feature of progressive imperialism that would make it more acceptable to liberalism.

Professor Feuer was generally correct in his characterization of imperialism, and his distinction is legitimate enough, though not always the most useful way to analyze it. We could also distinguish between "strategic" and "ideological" imperialism, for example. In the former, expansion comes about because of the need to defend your nation against an aggressive foreign competitor (Rome against Carthage or the United States against the Soviets, for example), while, in "ideological" imperialism, expansion and conquest result from the imperatives of an "armed doctrine" or a charismatic leader (Alexander the Great, Genghis Khan,

Napoleon, seventh-century Islam, 18th-century Jacobinism, or 20th-century communism, for example). Moreover, it is clear that some such rationalization of contemporary post-Cold War American imperialism as that offered by Professor Feuer now prevails among American apologists for empire: The American Empire today, whatever its origins, is justified precisely because it claims to export the values of liberalism to all mankind and to destroy premodern societies and values.

Of course, the rationalization of any political system should never be taken at face value. Not only are there always anomalies between the way imperialism is defended by intellectuals disposed to do so and the way in which empires are actually obtained and ruled, but there are often ulterior reasons why imperialist intellectuals defend empire. Vergil's lines about "putting down the proud, the fettered slave to free" no doubt sounded terrific to the Romans who knew them, but to the hundreds of thousands of Gauls dragged off in chains to Mediterranean slave markets by the armies of Julius Caesar for the profit of the Roman ruling class, the poetry might have rung a bit hollow. Today, in the wake of American soldiers blasting Afghan, Iraqi, and Sudanese *fellaheen* to atoms, there march the transnational capitalist behemoths that will consolidate the "liberation" that empire brings with fast-food palaces, television that imports the piety of Pat Robertson along with the virtues of *Sex and the City*, and, eventually, modern highway and transportation systems that will level whatever remains of the non-Western civilizations of the East. As for slaves, there will be plenty to go round for everyone when the hordes of immigrants, refugees, and asylum-seekers descend on the empire's home shores.

It is precisely *this* consequence of imperialism—whatever its motives and whoever runs it and gains from it—that is the most important reason why serious conservatives should reject Professor Feuer's essentially neoconservative rationalization of empire. Imperialism is "cosmopolitan." It *does* dissolve the cultural integument of the societies and peoples it conquers, and it welcomes those peoples into the imperial ecumene and promotes them (or some of them) into the imperial ruling class, perhaps even into the imperial purple. That is exactly what those Romans who survived the imperial experience came to regret about the whole business, as evidenced in lines later than

those of Vergil about the Orontes spilling its sewage into the Tiber. It was not the prevalence of the notion of a "career open to talents" or modern meritocracy that enabled such worthies as Septimius Severus, a North African, Philip the Arab, the son of a bandit chief, and similar adventurers to hoist themselves onto the throne but the disappearance of any criterion of legitimate authority except the skills of the *condottiere*, and it was clear to the surviving real Romans that the "liberation" that "progressive imperialism" brings carries a cost: the disintegration of the conquering culture and the empowerment of aliens. Historian Martin Nilsson noted that the son of Marcus Aurelius was the last Roman emperor of purely Italian stock and that the "Oriental [*i.e.*, Levantine] infiltration into the ruling classes of the Empire reached its height under Septimius Severus, coincidentally with the general victory of Oriental religious ideas." What Professor Feuer and his followers find to be "progress" is, to the actual builders of empire, nothing more than the extinction of their own culture by the aliens who profit from the arrangement.

That lesson ought to be obvious already to Americans, even before a full-scale formal empire is proclaimed and the perpetual wars that build it are begun. The most obvious price of modern European imperialism is the mass immigration now pouring into Europe, the United States, and Canada. In the case of Great Britain and France, the immigration they receive is the direct result of their empires; in the American case, it is the indirect result of our domination of the Western Hemisphere for the last century or more. It is mainly through the mass movements of populations—as slaves, armies, refugees, or immigrants—that the acid of imperialism erodes the very vessels that carry it.

As for the "talents" that empires suddenly release and allow to clamber up the social and political ladder, there is no doubt that this happens. Since the imperial acid eats away the cultural standards by which human achievements are evaluated, what else could possibly qualify the new leaders of the imperium but crude intelligence, cunning, brutality, and naked ambition? That some who display such traits might also eventually acquire civilized manners and beliefs is always a possibility, but there seems to be little indication that the later rulers of the Roman Empire (or of the British and American

ones) did so to any considerable degree. If Dick Morris and Karl Rove had only a few of the virtues of Severus or Philip the Arab, the American empire might look forward to a brighter future than we can realistically expect.

Indeed, what today would constitute the American Empire has long since ceased to be recognizably American at all. The managerial class that presides over it glories in announcing that it no longer considers itself American, and, for all the flag-waving that the September 11 attacks stirred up, few really believe that a genuine national patriotism has been reclaimed. The terrorist attacks serve the ruling class well because they allow it to invoke patriotism and national security as an immediate justification for waging World War IV in order to conquer the world, but only those peasants who regard Lee Greenwood as a real country-music singer will be deluded by it. Indeed, if the American Empire is not really American, it is also not really an empire, progressive or regressive. An empire, after all, is the territory conquered by a political entity residing on a different territory. Because the managerial class has disengaged itself from any particular territory, and because its global power rests far less on the control of territory than on technical skills, knowledge, and the organizations it manages, its "empire" is virtually invisible and intangible.

Still, it cannot afford to allow gangs of primitives who take their religion seriously, believe in ethnic, sexual, and credal hierarchies, and reject modernity and technology to run around blowing up its office buildings and slaughtering thousands of its executive personnel—and, therefore, the imperialism of the managerial class is also a strategic one, intended simply to abolish, by either bloodshed or deracination, the cultural centers from which the threat to its power and existence emanate, just as much as the Roman senate intended to wipe the city-state of Carthage off the map, exterminate its people, and sow salt over the ground where the city lay. Whether it is ultimately progressive or regressive, American or transnational, the imperialism that is now emerging and that has suddenly become so fashionable shows every sign of enduring longer and conducting itself much more brutally than most of the imperial systems that have strutted across history's stage in the past ever did.



by Scott P. Richert

This Is Your Hometown

About two years ago, I wrote a "Letter From Rockford" entitled "A Month in the Life of the Industrial Midwest" (April 2001), in which I used excerpts from news reports to illustrate the rather dramatic economic changes that were taking place in the Rockford area—plant closings, layoffs, declining wages. At the time, I had no way of knowing, but the very month after the one that I had chosen to highlight—March 2001—has since been acknowledged by the federal government as the first month of the current recession, which may explain the number of phone calls, letters, and e-mails I received from readers across the country who said that, after reading the column, they had begun to notice similar news stories in their local media. The hard times, it seemed, were not confined to Rockford or even to the Rust Belt.

Now, two years, a midterm election, a bear market, and a September 11th later, there are precious few signs that it is morning again in America. In fact, looking at the overall state of the economy, the most remarkable thing, perhaps, is how much discretionary spending continues to go on. Very few chain restaurants have folded during this recession (locally owned restaurants, of course, are another story, but that's true in every economic climate), and the traffic continues to stream past my living-room window every Saturday and Sunday, as consumers (the only proper name for them) in their new, zero-percent-financed Japanese cars seek to fill the hole at the center of their existence with the latest piece of plastic forged from Middle Eastern oil by wage slaves in a Chinese factory.

The zero-percent financing provides the key to the puzzle, and the federal government has noted an incredible spike in household debt, as Americans have financed their continued consumption through credit cards, auto and home-equity loans, and advances on their 401(k)s. This cannot continue indefinitely, however: Some reports indicate that average household debt may have doubled since 2000 (average household credit-card debt alone reached \$8,500 by mid-2002), and the rate of personal bankruptcy has risen to unprecedented heights. At some point,

even dual-income families, who have to shop because they cannot afford not to, will have to curtail their spending. And then Rockford's East State Street corridor of chain restaurants and big-box stores will begin to resemble a supersized version of her struggling downtown.

*Now Main Street's whitewashed
windows and vacant stores
Seems like there ain't nobody wants
to come down here no more . . .*

Nowhere is the underlying softness in the economy more obvious than in the small-business manufacturing sector. Several of the stories I highlighted in the earlier column concerned the closing of small factories, often the result of larger corporations (particularly in the auto industry) moving jobs to Mexico or China (and, increasingly, Eastern Europe). While the auto industry isn't necessarily setting out to replace the small factories' products with foreign-made parts (by, for instance, reversing the decades-long trend toward outsourcing when the Big Three move their factories overseas), NAFTA and GATT have still made it harder for small American manufacturers to compete. Tariffs may have been reduced or eliminated, but other costs—particularly transportation—have increased. The pressure then mounts on the small manufacturer to move his own operation south of the border or overseas, so that he can eliminate these additional costs or offset them through cheaper labor. If he refuses to do so, he may find, as one Rockford-area manufacturer recently did, that he has no option but to sell to someone who will.

*They're closing down the textile mill
across the railroad tracks
Foreman says these jobs are going
boys and they ain't coming back
To your hometown . . .*

Recently, I spent part of two days visiting the factories of Rockford Acromatic Products, a locally owned manufacturer of after-market auto parts. Founded by Dean Olson, Sr., in 1949, Rockford Acromatic (also known as Rockford Constant



Velocity) is now run by his sons, Dean (a longtime *Chronicles* supporter) and Jim Olson. The company has two factories, both "across the railroad tracks"—one on Beacon Street in Loves Park and the other on 11th Street in Rockford. The 11th Street plant also functions as a storage and shipping facility.

With the decline of the domestic steel industry over the last 20 years, Rockford Acromatic has become heavily dependent on foreign steel. Like (I suspect) many *Chronicles* readers, I initially cheered when President Bush announced that he was placing a tariff on certain steel imports. Now, after touring Rockford Acromatic and discussing the effects of the tariff with Dean Olson, I'm not so sure.

The problem is not that either tariffs or free trade are bad *per se* but that they always need to be viewed in historical context. Back during the battles over NAFTA and GATT of the early 1990's, when *Chronicles* was opposing such trade agreements because they had the potential to undermine national security and to gut the American economy, many libertarians joined forces with us, albeit for different reasons. As one prominent paleolibertarian never tired of saying, we don't need thousands of pages of regulations to declare that there will be free trade among the United States, Canada, and Mexico; all we need is the simple statement that "There will be free trade among the United States, Canada, and Mexico." That view, to put it charitably, is naive. "Free trade" is an abstract concept that has never existed in reality and never will. Once we recognize that condition, we can also understand that every businessman will try to structure trade in such a way that it will benefit him and his business. That's human nature. As Dean Olson says, "I don't know anyone who doesn't believe in free trade; it's just that it hasn't been