

## AMERICAN EMPIRE

## Thirst for Empire

by John Willson

Tacitus, writing about Caesar Augustus and the beginnings of the Roman Empire, says, "How few were left who had seen the republic!"

How few are left. Tacitus also mourns that the "State had been revolutionized, and there was not a vestige left of the old morality." John Dickinson, who, like many of the founders of the American republic, was a student of Tacitus, warned in his defense of the Constitution that two things would doom the American experiment. One is the "imitation of foreign fashions." He said, "May her citizens aspire at a national dignity in every part of conduct, private as well as public."

Dickinson said that the other thing was even more dangerous: the "thirst of empire." This is a vice that ever has been, and from the nature of things, ever must be, fatal to republican forms of government." How few are left who have seen the republic.

Private conduct aside—and it is very difficult to convince even the small minority of our young people who have been reared in two-parent Christian homes that there is a direct relation between the health of the soul and the health of the republic—our good leaders are now seeking to be emperors. I think we do have good leaders. George Bush, Dick Cheney, Colin Powell, Donald Rumsfeld, Condoleezza Rice—all are good and decent people, as far as we can tell, and that is something we have rarely been able to say about the makers of American foreign policy since the Big War that got us into the business of being an empire.

It is often said that "libertarians" blame wars for creating the managerial state. This is part of the ignorance of most of our citizens and the mendacity of our so-called "neoconservatives." Libertarians and liberals are one and the same, all progressives. Progressives got us into World War I. Progressives got us into World War II. Progressives got us into Korea. Progressives got us into Viet-

nam. Progressives got us into the Gulf, into Kosovo, and now into Iraq again. Not one American war of the 20th century came upon us because of decisions taken by an American conservative. Let us not think that *National Review* or the *Weekly Standard* or the *Wall Street Journal* are run by conservatives, or that most of the "columnists" who write under that honorable title are, either. Most Americans with a reasonable amount of common sense know that we get into wars *only because progressive leaders think they can change the world for the better.*

And look at the domestic facts. Every major piece of progressive legislation in our country's history has been passed by Congress during wartime, with the exception of Social Security and the subsidies for unions and farmers. They were given to us in the war against the Great Depression, and every President since then has declared some kind of war, even in the presence of the real thing, in order to enhance the agenda of the managerial state and empire. The two go together—always have, and always will. I do not need to rehearse it in detail here: Look at the histories of Cairo, Athens, Rome, Paris, London, Moscow, Tokyo, and every other pale imitation of Washington, D.C. Add up what happened under Lincoln, (T.) Roosevelt, Wilson, (F.D.) Roosevelt, Truman, Kennedy, Johnson, Carter, Clinton.

Notice that the thirst for empire started with Republicans, then shifted dramatically to Democrats, and now seems to be reverting to Republicans. How few are left who have seen the republic.

Timothy Dwight was a grandson of Jonathan Edwards and a fifth-generation New Englander. He was a pastor, the president of Yale (he made Yale a great college), called in his lifetime the "second citizen of New England." A few people, Dwight included, thought that John Adams was the first. Dwight wrote poems and essays about America, trying to help his students and fellow citizens understand what they owned because of where they were born. Was America an idea? Was it an abstraction that could be applied to Indians (or to Indians, for that matter) or Frenchmen or Russians? He wrote *Greenfield Hill* (a long poem modeled on Virgil's *Georgics* and *Eclogues*) and *Travels in New England and New*

*York* (four volumes of essays on the daily lives of New Englanders) to answer the questions, *What binds Americans together? What is worth preserving?*

In a nutshell, it was Greenfield Hill that was worth preserving. Greenfield Hill, Connecticut, was the village where Dwight preached, taught in his own little school that became a rival of Yale for preparing boys for college, tilled a six-acre garden, and reared his family. He used the term "competence" to describe the farmers and artisans and their wives who inhabited the towns of New England:

How bless'd the sight of such a  
numerous train  
In such small limits, tasting good  
Of competence, of independence,  
peace,  
And liberty unmingled; every house  
On its own ground, and every  
happy swain  
Beholding no superior but the laws.

He said later in *Travels in New England and New York*,

There is not a spot on the globe,  
where so little is done to govern the  
inhabitants; nor a spot, where the  
inhabitants are so well governed,  
or perhaps, in more appropriate  
terms, where the state of society is  
so peaceable, orderly, and happy.

This was not an idea. It was not an abstraction called "freedom" or "equality." It was a way of life, which is all that any decent society can be. Dwight once said (this is from Bill Dennis's description) that he loved his family and so he could love his church; his church, so his town; his town, so Connecticut; Connecticut, so his nation. When Tocqueville visited New England a generation after Dwight died, he said that

The strength of a free people resides in the local community. Local institutions are to liberty what primary schools are to science: they put it within the people's reach; they teach people to appreciate its peaceful enjoyment and accustom them to make use of it. Without local institutions a nation may give itself a free government,

but it has not got the spirit of liberty.

*Competence* never comes from government. If we never learn another thing from Dwight and the Founding Fathers, it should be this. Society precedes government, which is one thing that bound together the otherwise ornery Adams, Washington, Madison, and even Hamilton. John C. Calhoun would later agree.

Dwight summed up his life's work with what he said to every Yale graduating class from 1795 to 1817:

More free than we are, man with his present character cannot be. If we preserve such freedom, we shall do what never has been done. The only possible means of its preservation, miracles apart, is the preservation of those institutions from which it has been derived.

If it is in the least bit true that our liberty depends on our families, churches, and local communities, preserving them trumps every other consideration of politics and policy.

Dwight and all of our other Founding Fathers believed that good politics required good character in our leaders. If we assume, as I do, that we have right now good character in our leaders, we still must convince them that they are spending their time on the wrong things. Everything focused on a "War on Terror" will serve only to build government, not citizens and not society. Empires destroy societies, even if they occasionally produce a Marcus Aurelius or a Ronald Reagan.

It is of no use to us now to hold our leaders to a higher standard than they are capable of bearing. Since they are good people, it is up to us to encourage them to be prudent. Reading Aristotle's *Politics* reminds us that we must do what good work all the best Greeks did: the *empirical* work of finding what helps free people remain free.

Never, ever, has war served any good purpose but to defend home and hearth. Few histories point out that there was no war of the American Revolution in New England after the battle of Bunker/Breed's Hill. The rising of the towns took care of it. This is our heritage, not the progressive Albert Beveridge's (and both Roosevelts, Woodrow Wilson, Harry Truman, John Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, and sadly, the George Bushes) argument that we are "a greater England with a no-

bler destiny." Beveridge also said that we are "a people imperial by virtue of their power, by right of their institutions, by authority of their Heaven-directed purposes—the propagandists and not the misers of liberty."

The triumphalism of the neoconservatives stands in the bold progressive tradition, which they now argue is conservative. But may we get this straight? They have lost the argument (read the essays by Samuel Francis, Paul Gottfried, and Thomas Fleming *contra* David Frum and Jonah Goldberg) and probably have lost the political predominance that they have thought they enjoyed. It is now up to us to be generous and helpful.

*The thirst for empire destroys republics.* We cannot tolerate leaders who act contrary to this fundamental conservative principle, but we cannot also join the enemies of our republic who insist that the leaders who sometimes go to excess in the war against "terror" (whatever that means) are the moral equivalents of President Clinton. Prudence is the most important political principle. Prudence applied now in the Middle East may allow us to turn our attention back to restoring *our* republic, rather than to rushing falsely into creating them for others. Timothy Dwight liked to talk about "the dignified character of free republicans." Can any real patriot think of a better name for ourselves?

John Willson is Salvatori Professor of History and Traditional Values at Hillsdale College.

## LITERATURE

### Making the Whole World England

by Marian Kester Coombs

As a race, the British are considered neither the most intellectual nor the most artistic, Britain's role in the invention of modern physics (Newton) and modern painting (Turner) notwithstanding. Yet their ability to make cultural icons of near-universal appeal is second to none. Quite apart from the philosophical contributions of Locke and Burke and Hume and Mill, apart from the breakthroughs of Faraday and Jenner and Rutherford, apart from the human liberation presaged by

Magna Carta and the Glorious Revolution and Wilberforce, the British people have shown a genius for touching and stirring the hearts of millions in a way no other nation has managed since the impact of Greek and Roman imagery on the then (much smaller) known world. A perfectly delightful whimsy, an eccentricity that concentrates the mind wonderfully, and a deep-archetypal imagination combine to make them the world's premier storytellers, masters of the common touch.

Of course, English-speakers do not seem to care about the provenance of our imaginative fare so long as it be succulent, and, in our insatiable appetite for a good story, we have scoured the globe for centuries in quest of translatable delicacies. Still, other peoples have not added to the global store of fantasy nearly as voluminously as have the British.

The power of the British imagination plays a major role in the hegemony of English today as the global language: To savor that imagination, to get lost in that movie, to get down with that rock 'n' roll, one is lured into learning English. For instance, the bait of *Anne of Green Gables* (written by a very British Canadian) created such a cult in Japan that a virtual tourist invasion of Prince Edward Island ensued, at least until the yen faltered against the Canadian dollar.

For all their supposed reserve, the British have never been loath to tout their language and culture. Of course, they are fond of deprecating their knack for self-marketing, but this, too, is part of their genius: To "make the whole world England" has always meant conquest, not just of territory but of fancy. They also have a genius for reinventing themselves as needed: the New Rome; the New Jerusalem; Her Majesty's Empire on its "civilizing mission"; the brave besieged little Shire; Angry Young Men; Licensed to Kill; Swinging London; "Cool Britannia."

In light of all this British brilliance, then, it is curious that J.R.R. Tolkien was moved to write his fantasy masterpiece, *The Lord of the Rings*, because

I was from early days grieved by the poverty of my own beloved country: it had no stories of its own, not of the quality that I sought and found in legends of other lands. There was Greek, and Celtic, and Romance, Germanic, Scandinavian, and Finnish; but nothing English, save impoverished chapbook stuff. I had a mind to make