New Rome, New Jerusalem

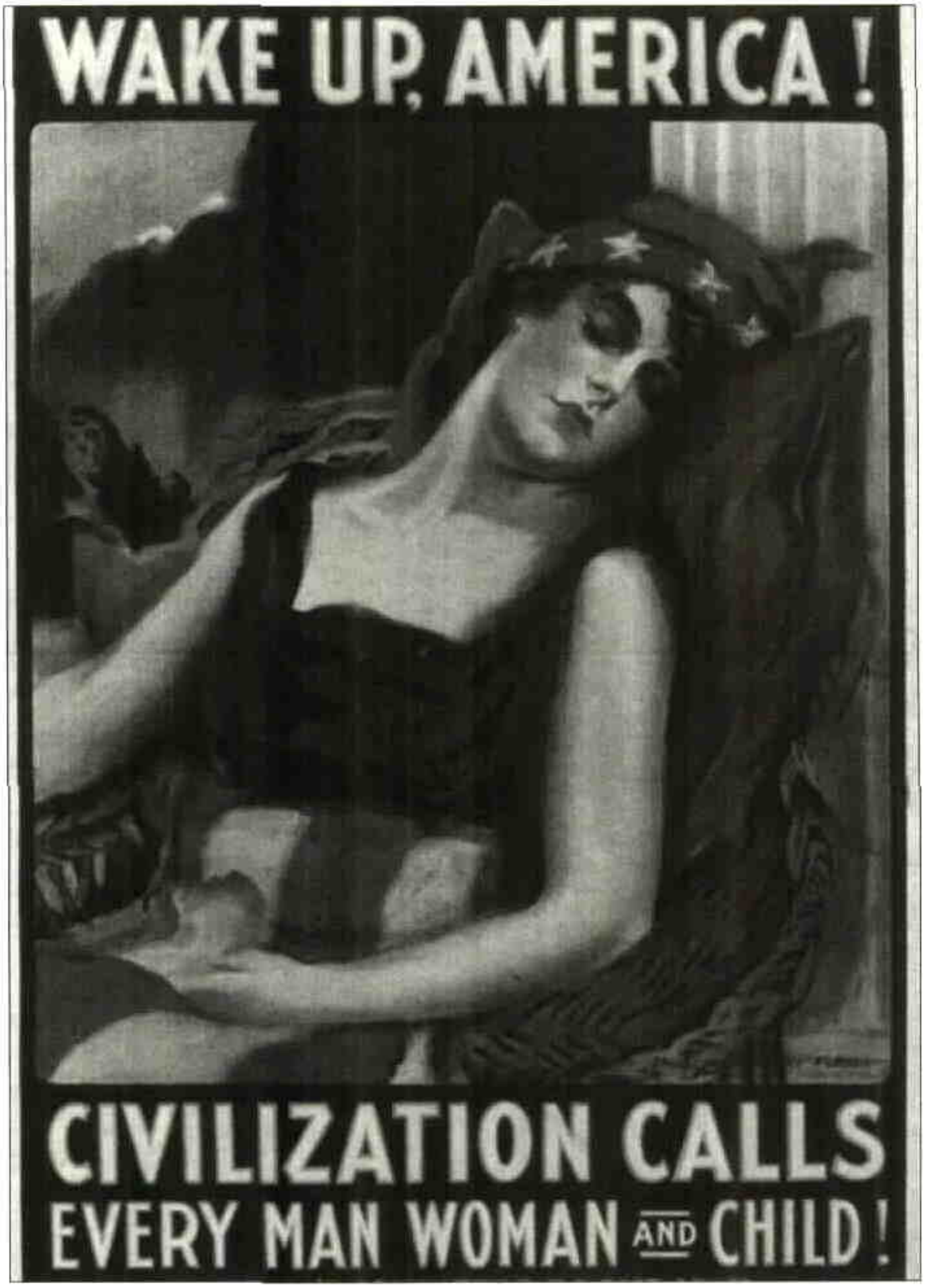
by Andrew J. Bacevich

No longer fodder for accusations and denials, American imperialism has of late become a proposition to be considered on its merits. In leading organs of opinion, such as *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, the notion that the United States today presides over a global imperium has achieved something like respectability.

This is a highly salutary development. For only by introducing the idea of empire into the mainstream of public discourse does it become possible to address matters far more pressing than mulling over the semantic distinctions between empire and hegemony and "global leadership." What precisely is the nature of the Pax Americana? What is its purpose? What are the challenges and pitfalls that await the United States in the management of its domain? What are the likely costs of empire, moral as well as material, and who will pay them? These are the questions that are now beginning to find a place on the agenda of U.S. foreign policy.

As befits a nation founded on the conviction of its own uniqueness, the American empire is like no other in history. Indeed, the peculiar American approach to empire offers a striking affirmation of American exceptionalism. For starters, that approach eschews direct rule over subject peoples. Apart from a handful of possessions left over from a brief, anomalous land grab in 1898, we have no colonies. We prefer access and influence to ownership. Ours is an informal empire, composed not of satellites or fiefdoms but of nominally coequal states. In presiding over this empire, we prefer to exercise our authority indirectly, as often as not through intermediary institutions in which the United States enjoys the predominant role but does not wield outright control (e.g., the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, the United Nations Security Council, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Bank).

Although we enjoy unassailable military supremacy and are by no means averse to using force, we prefer seduction to coercion. Rather than impose our will by the sword, we count on the allure of the "American way of life" to win over doubters and subvert adversaries. In the imperium's most valued precincts, deference to Washington tends to be rendered voluntarily. Thus, postwar Europe, viewing the United States as both protector and agent of economic revival, actively pursued American dominion, thereby laying the basis for an "empire by invitation" that persists even though European prosperity has long since been restored and threats to Europe's security have all but disappeared. An analogous situation prevails in the Pacific, where Japan and other states, more than able to defend themselves, willingly conform to an American-ordered security regime.



Wilson's way? A 1917 poster summoning Americans to the Great War struck a theme that still resonates across the political spectrum: America has a transcendent mission in the world.

Imperial powers are all alike in their shared devotion to order. Imperial powers differ from one another in the values they purport to inculcate across their realm. To the extent that the empires of Spain, France, and Great Britain defined their purpose (at least in part) as spreading the benefits of Western civilization, the present-day Pax Americana qualifies as their historical successor. But whereas those earlier imperial ventures specialized in converting pagans or enlightening savages, the ultimate value and the ultimate aspiration of the American imperium is freedom. Per Thomas Jefferson, ours is an "empire of liberty."

From the outset, Americans self-consciously viewed the United States as an enterprise imbued with a providential significance extending far beyond the nation's boundaries. America was no sooner created than it became, in the words of the poet Philip Freneau, "a New Jerusalem sent down from heaven." But the salvation this earthly Zion promised was freedom, not eternal life. Recall George Washington's first inaugural address, in 1789: "The preservation of the sacred fire of liberty," he declared, had been "intrusted to the hands of the American people." The imperative in Washington's day not to promulgate the sacred fire but simply to keep it from being extinguished reflected a realistic appraisal of the young republic's standing among the nations of the world. For the moment, it lacked the capacity to do more than model freedom.

FROM THE OUTSET, AMERICANS SELF-CONSCIOUSLY VIEWED THE UNITED STATES AS AN ENTERPRISE IMBUED WITH A PROVIDENTIAL SIGNIFICANCE EXTENDING FAR BEYOND THE NATION'S BOUNDARIES.

Over the course of the next 200 years, that would change. By the time the Berlin Wall fell in 1989, effectively bringing to a close a century of epic ideological struggle, the New Jerusalem had ascended to a category of its own among the world's powers. The United States was dominant politically, economically, culturally, and, above all, militarily. In effect, the New Jerusalem had become the New Rome, an identity that did not supplant America's founding purpose but pointed toward its fulfillment—and the fulfillment of history itself. To President Bill Clinton, the moment signified that "the fullness of time" was at hand. Thomas Paine's claim that Americans had it in their power "to begin the world over again" no longer seemed preposterous. Salvation beckoned. In Reinhold Niebuhr's evocative phrase, the United States stood poised to complete its mission of "tutoring mankind on its pilgrimage to perfection."

Early Americans saw the task of tutoring mankind as a directive from on high; later Americans shouldered the burden out of a profound sense of self-interest. Despite the frequent allusions to liberty in describing that pilgrimage's final destination and in justifying the use of American power, the architects of U.S. policy in the 20th century never viewed empire as an exercise in altruism. Rather, at least from the time of Woodrow Wilson, they concluded that only by protecting and promoting the freedom of others could Americans fully guarantee their nation's own well-being. The two were inextricably linked.

>ANDREW J. BACEVICH *is a professor of international relations at Boston University. His book* American Empire: The Realities and Consequences of U.S. Diplomacy, *will be published in the fall by Harvard University Press.*

In the eyes of Wilson and his heirs, to distinguish between American ideals (assumed to be universal) and American interests (increasingly global in scope) was to make a distinction without a difference. It was a plain fact that successive crusades to advance those ideals—against German militarism in 1917, fascism and Japanese imperialism in 1941, and communism after World War II—resulted in the United States' accruing unprecedented power. Once the smoke had cleared, the plain fact defined international politics: One nation with its own particular sense of how the world should operate stood like a colossus astride the globe.

Not surprisingly, Americans viewed the distribution of power as a sort of cosmic judgment, an affirmation that the United States was (in a phrase favored by politicians in the 1990s) on "the right side of history." American preeminence offered one measure of humanity's progress toward freedom, democracy, and world peace. Those few who persisted in thinking otherwise—in American parlance, "rogue regimes"—marked themselves not only as enemies of the United States but as enemies of freedom itself.

The barbarous events of September 11 revealed that the pilgrimage to perfection was far from over. But not for a moment did they cause American political leaders to question the project's feasibility. If anything, September 11 reinforced their determination to complete the journey. In offering his own explanation for the attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, George W. Bush refused to countenance even the possibility that an assault on symbols of American economic and military power might have anything to do with how the United States employed its power. He chose instead to frame the issue at hand in terms of freedom. Why do they hate us? "They hate our freedoms," Bush explained. Thus did the president skillfully deflect attention from the consequences of empire.

September 11 became the occasion for a new war, far wider in scope than any of the piddling military interventions that had kept American soldiers marching hither and yon during the preceding decade. In many quarters, that conflict has been described as the equivalent of another world war. The description is apt. As the multifaceted U.S. military campaign continues to unfold, it has become clear that the Bush administration does not intend simply to punish those who perpetrated the attacks on New York and Washington or to preclude the recurrence of any such incidents. America's actual war aims are far more ambitious. The United States seeks to root out terror around the globe. It seeks also to render radical Islam and the nations that make up the "axis of evil" incapable of threatening the international order.

But there is more still: The Bush administration has used the war on terror as an occasion for conducting what is, in effect, a referendum on U.S. global primacy. In this cause, as President Bush has emphasized, all must declare their allegiance: Nations either align themselves with the United States or they cast their lot with the terrorists—and, by implication, can expect to share their fate. As a final byproduct of September 11, the administration has seized the opportuni-

ty to promulgate a new Bush Doctrine, incorporating such novel concepts as "anticipatory self-defense" and "preemptive deterrence." Through the Bush Doctrine, the United States—now combining, in the words of Stanley Hoffmann, the roles of "high-noon sheriff and proselytizing missionary"—lays claim to wider prerogatives for employing force to reorder the world.

In short, the conflict joined after September 11 may well qualify as a war *against* terror and *against* those who "hate our freedoms." But it is no less genuinely a conflict waged *on behalf of* the American imperium, a war in which, to fulfill its destiny as the New Jerusalem, the United States, as never before, is prepared to exert its authority as the New Rome.

Thus, when the president vowed in December 2001 that "America will lead the world to peace," he was not simply resurrecting some windy Wilsonian platitude. He was affirming the nation's fundamental strategic purpose and modus operandi. The United States will "lead"—meaning that it will persevere in its efforts to refashion the international order, employing for that purpose the preeminent power it acquired during the century of its ascendancy (which it has no intention of relinquishing in the century just begun). And it will do so with an eye toward achieving lasting "peace"—meaning an orderly world, conducive to American enterprise, friendly to American values, and perpetuating America's status as sole superpower. This was the aim of U.S. policy prior to September 11; it remains the aim of the Bush administration today.

How widespread is support for this imperial enterprise? Despite the tendency of American statesmen from Wilson's day to our own to resort to coded language whenever addressing questions of power, the project is not some conspiracy hatched by members of the elite and then foisted on an unsuspecting citizenry. The image of the United States leading the world to peace (properly understood) commands broad assent in virtually all segments of American society. A fringe of intellectuals, activists, and self-described radicals might take umbrage at the prospect of a world remade in America's image and policed by American power, but out on the hustings the notion plays well—so long, at least, as the required exertions are not too taxing. The fact is that Americans like being number one, and since the end of the Cold War have come to accept that status as their due. Besides, someone has to run the world. Who else can do the job?

THE FACT IS THAT AMERICANS LIKE BEING NUMBER ONE, AND SINCE THE END OF THE COLD WAR HAVE COME TO ACCEPT THAT STATUS AS THEIR DUE.

What are the empire's prospects? In some respects, the qualities that have contributed to the nation's success in other endeavors may serve the United States well in this one. Compared with the citizens of Britain in the

A Humanitarian Empire

Empires are not always planned. The original American colonies began as the unintended byproduct of British religious strife. The British political class was not so sure it wanted to rule India, but commercial interests dragged it in there anyway. The United States today will be an even more reluctant imperialist. But a new imperial moment has arrived, and by virtue of its power America is bound to play the leading role. The question is not whether America will seek to fill the void created by the demise of European empires but whether it will acknowledge that this is what it is doing. Only if Washington acknowledges this task will its response be coherent.

The first obstacle to acknowledgment is the fear that empire is infeasible. True, imposing order on failed states is expensive, difficult, and potentially dangerous. . . . But these expenses need to be set against the cost of fighting wars against terrorists, drug smugglers, and other international criminals. . . .

The second obstacle to facing the imperial challenge is the stale choice between unilateralism and multilateralism. Neither option, as currently understood, provides a robust basis for responding to failed states. Unilateralists rightly argue that weak allies and cumbersome multilateral arrangements undercut international engagement. Yet a purely unilateral imperialism is no more likely to work than the sometimes muddled multilateral efforts assembled in the past. Unilateralists need to accept that chaotic countries are more inclined to accept foreign nation-builders if they have international legitimacy. And U.S. opinion surveys suggest that international legitimacy matters domestically as well. The American public's support for the Persian Gulf War and the Afghan conflict reflected the perception that each operation was led by the United States but backed by the court of world opinion.

The best hope of grappling with failed states lies in institutionalizing this mix of U.S. leadership and international legitimacy. Fortunately, one does not have to look far to see how this could be accomplished. The World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) already embody the same hybrid formula: Both institutions reflect American thinking and priorities yet are simultaneously multinational. The mixed record of both institutions—notably the World Bank's failure on failed states—should not obscure their organizational strengths: They are more professional and less driven by national patronage than are United Nations agencies.

A new international body with the same governing structure could be set up to deal with nation-building. It would be subject neither to the frustrations of the UN Security Council, with its Chinese and Russian vetoes, nor to those of the UN General Assembly, with its gridlocked one-country–one-vote system. . . . It would assemble nation-building muscle and expertise and could be deployed wherever its American-led board decided, thus replacing the ad hoc begging and arm twisting characteristic of current peacekeeping efforts. Its creation would not amount to an imperial revival. But it would fill the security void that empires left—much as the system of mandates did after World War I ended the Ottoman Empire.

The new fund would need money, troops, and a new kind of commitment from the rich powers and it could be established only with strong U.S. leadership. Summoning such leadership is immensely difficult, but America and its allies have no easy options in confronting failed states. They cannot wish away the problem that chaotic power vacuums can pose. They cannot fix it with international institutions as they currently exist. . . . They must either mold the international machinery to address the problems of their times, as their predecessors did in creating the United Nations, the World Bank, and the IMF after World War II. Or they can muddle along until some future collection of leaders rises to the challenge.

—*Sebastian Mallaby*

Sebastian Mallaby, the author of After Apartheid: The Future of South Africa *(1992), is a columnist for* The Washington Post. *Excerpted from an article that appeared in* Foreign Affairs *(March–April 2002).*

age of Victoria or of Rome during the time of the Caesars, Americans wear their imperial mantle lightly. They go about the business of empire with a singular lack of pretense. Although Washington, D.C. has come to exude the self-importance of an imperial capital, those who live beyond its orbit have, thus far at least, developed only a limited appetite for pomp, privilege, and display. We are unlikely to deplete our treasury erecting pyramids or other monuments to our own ostensible greatness. In matters of taste, American sensibilities tend to be popular rather than aristocratic. Our excesses derive from our enthusiasms—frequently vulgar, typically transitory—rather than from any of the crippling French diseases: exaggerated self-regard, intellectual bloat, cynicism, and envy. All things considered, America's imperial ethos is pragmatic and without ostentation, evidence, perhaps, that the nation's rise to great-power status has not yet fully expunged its republican origins. Above all, measured against societies elsewhere in the developed world, American society today seems remarkably vigorous and retains an astonishing capacity to adapt, to recover, and to reinvent itself.

That said, when it comes to sustaining the Pax Americana, the United States faces several challenges.

First, no one is really in charge. Ours is an empire without an emperor. Although in times of crisis Americans instinctively look to the top for leadership—a phenomenon that greatly benefited George W. Bush after September 11—the ability of any president to direct the affairs of the American imperium is limited, in both degree and duration. Though he is routinely described as the most powerful man in the world, the president of the United States in fact enjoys limited authority and freedom of action. The system of government codified by the Constitution places a premium on separation and balance among the three branches that vie with one another in Washington, but also between the federal government and agencies at the state and local levels. Hardly less significant is the impact of other participants in the political free-for-all—parties, interest groups, lobbies, entrenched bureaucracies, and the media—that on any given issue can oblige the chief executive to dance to their tune. The notion of an "imperial presidency" is a fiction, and for that Americans can be grateful. But the fact remains that the nation's political system is not optimally configured for the management of empire.

COMPARED WITH THE CITIZENS OF BRITAIN IN THE AGE OF VICTORIA OR OF ROME DURING THE TIME OF THE CAESARS, AMERICANS WEAR THEIR IMPERIAL MANTLE LIGHTLY.

Second, although popular support for the empire is real, it is, in all likelihood, highly contingent. The heirs of the so-called greatest generation have little stomach for sacrifice. They expect the benefits of empire to outweigh the burdens and responsibilities, and to do so decisively. The gar-

Since 9/11, U.S. troops have been dispatched to about 20 countries, often to train local forces to combat Muslim extremists. This officer joined 1,200 other Americans in the Philippines in January.

den-variety obligations of imperial policing—for example, keeping peace in the Balkans or securing a U.S. foothold in Central Asia—are not causes that inspire average Americans to hurry down to their local recruiter's office. To put it bluntly, such causes are not the kind that large numbers of Americans are willing to die for.

In this sense, the empire's point of greatest vulnerability is not the prospect of China's becoming a rival superpower or of new terrorist networks' supplanting Al Qaeda—those developments we can handle—but rather the questionable willingness of the American people to foot the imperial bill. Sensitive to the limits of popular support—as vividly demonstrated after a single night's action in Mogadishu in 1993—policymakers over the past decade have exerted themselves mightily to pass that bill off to others. In the process, they have devised imaginative techniques for ensuring that when blood spills, it won't be American blood. Hence, the tendency to rely on high-tech weapons launched from beyond the enemy's reach, on proxies to handle any dirty work on the ground, or, as a last resort, on a cadre of elite professional soldiers who are themselves increasingly detached from civilian society.

Over the past decade, this effort to maintain the American empire on the cheap has (with the notable exception of September 11) enjoyed remarkable success. Whether policymakers can sustain this success indefinitely remains an open question, especially when each victory gained with apparent ease—Bosnia, Kosovo, Afghanistan—only rein-

forces popular expectations that the next operation will also be neat, tidy, and virtually fault-free.

The third challenge facing the American imperium concerns freedom itself. For if peace (and U.S. security) requires that the world be free as Americans define freedom, then the specifics of that definition complicate the management of empire in ways that thus far have received inadequate attention.

Here's the catch: As Americans continuously reinvent themselves and their society, they also reinvent—and in so doing, radically transform—what they mean by freedom. They mean not just independence, or even democracy and the rule of law. Freedom as Americans understand it today encompasses at least two other broad imperatives: maximizing opportunities for the creation of wealth and removing whatever impediments remain to confine the sovereign self. Freedom has come to mean treating the market and market values as sacrosanct (the economic agenda of the Right) and celebrating individual autonomy (the cultural agenda of the Left).

AS AMERICANS CONTINUOUSLY REINVENT THEMSELVES AND THEIR SOCIETY, THEY ALSO REINVENT—AND, IN SO DOING, RADICALLY TRANSFORM—WHAT THEY MEAN BY FREEDOM.

Without question, adherence to the principles of free enterprise offers the most efficient means for generating wealth. Without question, too, organizing society around such principles undermines other sources of authority. And that prospect mobilizes in opposition to the United States those in traditional and, especially, religious societies who are unwilling to abandon the old order.

The implications of shedding the last constraints on the individual loom even larger. The contemporary pursuit of freedom has put into play beliefs, arrangements, and institutions that were once viewed as fundamental and unalterable. Gender, sexuality, identity, the definition of marriage and family, and the origins, meaning, sacredness, and malleability of life—in American society, they are all now being re-examined to accommodate the claims of freedom.

Some view this as an intoxicating prospect. Others see it as the basis for a domestic culture war. In either case, pursuant to their present-day understanding of what freedom entails, Americans have embarked on an effort to reengineer the human person, reorder basic human relationships, and reconstruct human institutions that have existed for millennia.

To render a summary judgment on this project is not yet possible. But surely it is possible to appreciate that some in the world liken it to stepping off a moral precipice and view the New Jerusalem with trepidation. Their fears, and the resistance to which fear gives birth, all but guarantee that the legions of the New Rome will have their hands full for some time to come. ❑