

Max Boot, "Neither New nor Nefarious: The Liberal Empire Strikes Back," *Current History*, Vol. 102, no. 667 (November 2003)

Instructions: As you read, consider the following questions. Highlight and make marginal notations relevant to each of the following questions. Provide thoughtful, thorough written responses to assigned prompts.

- (1) According to Boot, what is the US's intention in Iraq? What is your view?
 - (2) According to Boot, is the US an empire? Is there anything wrong with that? Explain.
 - (3) What is different about American Imperialism?
 - (4) What are successful examples of US nation-building?
 - (5) What are 3 examples of US imperialism from the Spanish-American War to the Great Depression?
 - (6) According to Boot, what should we learn from those examples?
 - (7) What does Boot think of American colonial administrators?
 - (8) What is the typical pattern of US occupation?
 - (9) What are examples of the US moving towards democracy in her colonies?
 - (10) According to Boot, why should the occupation of the Philippines be viewed as particularly successful?
 - (11) Why did US interventions end?
 - (12) What achievements did the US have in Haiti?
 - (13) What positives do US troops bring to third-world countries?
 - (14) Why does occupation sometimes lead to "some unpleasant episodes?"
 - (15) What three reasons support US imperialism?
 - (16) What do you think of Boot's argument?
-

President George W. Bush came to office condemning the "nation building" undertaken by his predecessor in Haiti, Bosnia, and Kosovo. Yet circumstances beyond his control have forced the president to revise his stance. Since September 11, 2001, the United States has launched ambitious nation-building efforts in Afghanistan and Iraq. Despite being hobbled by a lack of resources and long-term planning, the US forces trying to remake these two countries have undoubtedly improved life for their people. Whether America will succeed in planting the seeds of democracy remains a question whose answer will not be known for years to come, but the intent--to leave these places better off--should be evident to everyone.

The historical record provides some perspective on the challenges facing the United States in its latest bout of what might be called "liberal imperialism." For obvious reasons, government officials shy away from the term. When asked on April 28, 2003, on the Arabic satellite television network al-Jazeera whether the United States was "empire building," Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld reacted as if he had been asked whether he wears women's underwear. "We don't seek empires," he replied huffily. "We're not imperialistic. We never have been."

That is a fine answer for public consumption. The problem is that it is not true. The United States has been an empire since at least 1803, when Thomas Jefferson purchased the Louisiana Territory. Throughout the nineteenth century, what Jefferson called the "empire of liberty" expanded across the continent. When US power stretched from "sea to shining sea," the American empire moved abroad, acquiring colonies ranging from Puerto Rico and the Philippines to Hawaii and Alaska.

While the formal empire mostly disappeared after World War 11, the United States set out on another bout of imperialism in Germany and Japan. It was called "occupation" rather than imperialism, but when Americans are running foreign governments, this is a distinction without a difference. Likewise, recent "nation building" experiments in Somalia, Haiti, Bosnia, Kosovo, Afghanistan, and Iraq amount to imperialism under another name. Not the old-fashioned imperialism bent on looting nations of their natural resources--if that were the motivation it is

hard to see why America would intervene in some of the poorest countries on the planet, such as Afghanistan and Haiti. Iraq, of course, does have vast oil reserves, but the cost of the military occupation (which has already soared over \$100 billion) will far exceed any possible economic benefits the United States will derive from guaranteeing uninterrupted access to the country's oil supply.

BACK TO NATION BUILDING

Compared with the grasping old imperialism of the past, America's "liberal imperialism" pursues far different, and more ambitious, goals. It aims to instill democracy in lands that have known tyranny, in the hope that doing so will short-circuit terrorism, military aggression, and weapons proliferation. This is an ambitious undertaking, the most successful examples of which are post-World War II Germany, Italy and Japan. In those cases, the US Army helped transform militaristic dictatorships into pillars of liberal democracy--one of the most significant developments of the twentieth century.

Critics of nation building question the relevance of these examples to today's world. Germany, Italy and Japan were advanced industrialized nations that had some experience with the rule of law and democratic institutions. And besides, the United States made a very large, very long-term commitment to those countries, a commitment justified by their importance to the world, but one that America has not so far made in any of the places where it has intervened in the past decade. Under the Marshall Plan, the United States poured \$79 billion in current dollars into Europe between 1948 and 1952. By contrast, the United States has committed far smaller amounts in economic assistance to Afghanistan and Iraq.

Fair enough. Let us leave Germany, Italy, and Japan aside, and look at the US peacekeeping record in what is now known as the third world. Between the Spanish-American War and the Great Depression, the United States embarked on an ambitious attempt at "progressive" imperialism in the Caribbean, Central America, and the Pacific. Successive administrations, from McKinley's to Wilson's, were emboldened to act by a variety of concerns. These included strategic reasons (keeping foreign powers out of areas deemed vital to US interests, such as the Panama Canal Zone) and economic reasons (expanding opportunities for American businesses in promising markets, such as China). Above all, there was the weight of "The White Man's Burden," the title of a famous poem written in 1899 by Rudyard Kipling in an attempt to persuade Washington to annex the Philippine Islands.

The United States did annex the Philippines. It also occupied a number of territories that, under various legal guises, remain part of the United States to this day: Samoa, Guam, Hawaii, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands. America occupied a number of other places temporarily in addition to the Philippines: the Panama Canal Zone, Haiti, the Dominican Republic, Nicaragua, and the Mexican city of Veracruz. The duration of occupation ranged from seven months (in Veracruz) to almost a century (in the Canal Zone). In the process, the United States produced a set of colonial administrators and soldiers who would not have been out of place on a veranda in New Delhi or Nairobi. Men like Leonard Wood, the dashing former Army surgeon and Rough Rider, who went on to administer Cuba and the Philippines; Charles Magoon, a stolid Nebraska lawyer who ran the Panama Canal Zone and then Cuba during the second US occupation (1906-1909); and Smedley Butler, the "Fighting Quaker," a marine who won two Congressional Medals of Honor in a career that took him from Nicaragua to China.

These were tough, colorful, resourceful operators who used methods not found in any training manual. The story of the Haitian-US Treaty of 1915, which gave a legal gloss to an American occupation that would last 19

years, captures the period. For years marines told one another that when Major Butler was sent to the presidential palace to obtain the signature of President Philippe Sudre Dartiguenave, the president, not wanting to sign, hid in his bathroom. Butler simply commandeered a ladder and climbed up through the bathroom window to present the treaty and a pen to the startled Dartiguenave. "Sign here," the major commanded, and the president did. Whether or not this "gorgeous legend" (as one marine called it) is actually true, it gives an accurate flavor of how US rule was consolidated.

PATTERNS OF OCCUPATION

Most of these occupations followed a pattern. The United States was usually drawn in by political unrest and a threat to its foreign financial interests; Washington often feared that if it did not act, some other power would. The United States would then occupy the capital, and its armed forces, usually a handful of marines, would fan out over the countryside to establish order. Often some guerrilla resistance materialized, but it was usually put down quickly by a small number of American troops, who had more sophisticated weaponry and (even more important) better training. In Haiti in 1915, 2,000 marines pacified a country of 2 million people, at a cost of only 3 dead Americans. America waged its longest and most arduous colonial campaign in the Philippines. It took 70,000 soldiers four years, suffering more than 4,000 casualties, to consolidate US control over the islands.

Once its rule was firmly established, the United States would set up a constabulary, a quasi-military police force led by Americans and made up of local enlisted men. Then the Americans would work with local officials to administer a variety of public services, from vaccinations and schools to tax collection. American officials, though often resented, usually proved more efficient and less venal than their native predecessors.

A priority was improving public health, partly out of altruism and partly to keep US troops themselves healthy in a tropical climate. Cuba set the pattern. There Walter Reed, an Army doctor, proved that yellow fever was spread by a particular variety of mosquito. A mosquito-eradication campaign undertaken at gunpoint drastically reduced the incidence of malaria and yellow fever, which had been ravaging the island for centuries. In Veracruz in 1914, Army General Frederick Funston cleaned up the water supply, improved sewage, and even imported 2,500 garbage cans from the United States. The death rate among city residents plummeted. US forces are undertaking similar public health campaigns in Iraq today.

American imperialists usually moved much more quickly than their European counterparts to transfer power to democratically elected local rulers--as they are attempting to do in Iraq initially by setting up a governing council of Iraqis. In 1907, under US rule, the Philippines became the first Asian state to establish a national legislature. In 1935 the archipelago became a domestically autonomous commonwealth headed by President Manuel Quezon, a former insurrectionist who once complained of the difficulty of fostering nationalism under this particular colonial regime: "Damn the Americans! Why don't they tyrannize us more?" (Total independence came in 1946, after Filipinos had fought side by side with GIs against the Japanese.)

In many of the countries that the United States occupied, holding fair elections became a top priority because once a democratically elected government was installed, the Americans felt they could withdraw. In 1925 the Coolidge administration refused to recognize the results of a stolen election in Nicaragua and the following year sent in the marines, even though the strongman who had stuffed the ballot boxes, General Emiliano Chamorro Vargas, was ardently pro-American. The United States went on to administer two elections in Nicaragua, in 1928

and 1932, that even the losers acknowledged were the fairest in the country's history. "The interventions by US Marines in Haiti, Nicaragua, the Dominican Republic and elsewhere in those years," writes the Harvard political scientist Samuel Huntington, "often bore striking resemblances to the interventions by Federal marshals in the conduct of elections in the American South in the 1960s: registering voters, protecting against electoral violence, ensuring a free vote and an honest count."

That is certainly not the popular impression. The interventions in Central America and the Caribbean have become infamous as "gunboat diplomacy" and "banana wars" undertaken at the behest of powerful Wall Street interests. Smedley Butler helped solidify this myth when, after his retirement from the Marine Corps, he became an ardent isolationist and anti-imperialist. He spent the 1930s denouncing his own career, claiming he had been "a racketeer for capitalism" and a "high-class muscle man for Big Business."

In fact, in the early years of the twentieth century, the United States was least likely to intervene in those nations (such as Argentina and Costa Rica) where American investors held the biggest stakes. The longest occupations were undertaken in precisely those countries--Nicaragua, Haiti, the Dominican Republic--where the United States had the smallest economic stakes. Moreover, two of the most interventionist presidents in American history Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson, were united in their contempt for what TR called "malefactors of great wealth." Wilson was probably the most imperialist president of all, and his interventions had a decidedly idealistic tinge. His goal, as he proclaimed at the start of his administration, was "to teach the South American republics to elect good men."

LEGACIES OF EMPIRE

How well did the United States achieve this aim? The record is mixed. Its greatest success (outside those territories that remain under the Stars and Stripes to this day) was in the Philippines--which, uncoincidentally, was also the site of one of its longest occupations. Among the institutions that Americans bequeathed to the Filipinos were public schools, a free press, an independent judiciary, a modern bureaucracy, democratic government, and separation of church and state. Unlike the Dutch in the East Indies, the British in Malaya, or the French in Indochina, the Americans left virtually no legacy of economic exploitation; Congress was so concerned about protecting the Filipinos that it barred large landholdings by American individuals or corporations. The US legacy was also lasting: the Philippines have been for the most part free and democratic save for the period from 1972 to 1986, when Ferdinand Marcos ruled by fiat, which is more than most other Asian countries can say.

The US legacy in the Caribbean and Central America was more fleeting. It is not true, as some critics later charged, that the United States deliberately installed dictators such as Duvalier, Batista, and Somoza. The governments left in power by American troops were usually democratic and decent. But they were also too weak to survive on their own. At one time the United States might have intervened to support democratically elected regimes. In the 1930s, however, President Franklin D. Roosevelt renounced the interventionist policies of his predecessors, including his cousin Theodore. Henceforth, FDR said, US relations with Latin America would be governed by the "Good Neighbor" policy, which meant in essence that Washington would work with whoever came to power, no matter how.

The US ambassador to Managua, Arthur Bill Lane, was shocked and upset when Anastasio Somoza, the commander of the Nicaraguan National Guard, murdered the former rebel leader Augusto Sandino and deposed

the democratically elected president (who was also his uncle), Dr. Juan Bautista Sacasa. Lane wanted to intervene, as the United States might have in the past; but Roosevelt refused: Of Somoza, FDR famously (if perhaps apocryphally) said, "He may be a son of a bitch, but he's our son of a bitch." But make no mistake: Somoza did not attain power because of America's support; he attained power because of its indifference. The same might be said of François ("Papa Doc") Duvalier in Haiti, Rafael Trujillo in the Dominican Republic, and other dictators who took over after US withdrawal.

Although its effects often wore off, US rule looks pretty good by comparison with what came before and after in most countries. Haiti offers a particularly dramatic example. Before the US occupation in 1915, seven presidents had been overthrown in seven years. After the last US marines left in 1934, the country lapsed back into instability until, in 1957, the black nationalist Duvalier assumed power. He and "Baby Doc" (his son Jean Claude) ruled continuously until 1986, presiding over a reign of terror undertaken by their savage secret police, the Tontons Macoutes. After Baby Doc's overthrow it was back to chaos, leavened only by despotism. In 1994 the United States was driven to intervene once again to oust a military junta and restore to power President Jean Bertrand Aristide. But no matter who is in charge, the Haitian people continue to suffer horrifying levels of poverty, crime, disease, and violence; their country is the poorest in the Western Hemisphere, and one of the poorest on earth.

By contrast, the almost two decades of American occupation stand out as an oasis of prosperity and stability. While not exactly democratic (the United States ruled for a time through an appointed president), the American occupation was undertaken with minimal force. Haiti hosted fewer than 800 US marines, and life was freer than at just about any time before or since. The Americans made no attempt to exploit Haiti economically; US authorities actively discouraged large American companies from setting up shop for fear that they would take advantage of the people. The US administrators ran the government fairly and efficiently, and by the time they left they could tick off a long list of achievements: 1,000 miles of roads and 210 bridges built, 9 major airfields, 1,250 miles of telephone lines, 82 miles of irrigation canals, 11 modern hospitals, 147 rural clinics, and on and on.

Unfortunately, most of the physical manifestations of the American empire--roads, hospitals, telephone systems--began to crumble not long after the marines pulled out. This should be no surprise; it has been the case whenever more technologically advanced imperialists have left a less sophisticated area, whether they were the Romans pulling out of Britain or the British out of India. The two most lasting legacies of American interventions in the Caribbean may be a resentment of the Yanquis, now perhaps fading, and a love of baseball, still passionately felt.

This does not mean, however, that occupation is entirely futile. US troops can stop the killing, end the chaos, create a breathing space, and establish the rule of law. What the inhabitants do then is up to them. If America's aim is to recreate Ohio in Kosovo or Haiti, the occupiers are doomed to disappointment. But if the goals are more modest, US rule can serve the interests of occupiers and occupied alike. Put another way, nation building is generally too ambitious a task, but state building is not, the apparatus of a functioning state can be developed much more quickly than a national consciousness.

HOW TO BUILD A STATE

Most successful examples of state building begin by imposing the rule of law--as the United States did in the Philippines, and Britain in India--which is a prerequisite for economic development and the eventual emergence

of democracy. Merely holding an election and leaving will likely achieve little, as the United States learned in Haiti in 1994. For occupation to have a meaningful impact, it should be fairly lengthy; if Americans are intent on a quick "exit strategy;" they might as well stay home.

History teaches another important lesson: that occupation duty sometimes leads troops to commit what are today called human rights abuses. It is easy to exaggerate the extent of these excesses. Brian Linn's recent history, *The Philippine War 1899-1902*, suggests that the conduct of American soldiers from 1899 to 1902 was not nearly as reprehensible as everyone from Mark Twain to New Left historians of the 1960s would have us believe.

But whenever a small number of occupation troops are placed in the midst of millions of potentially hostile foreigners, some unpleasant episodes are likely to occur. During the US occupation of the Dominican Republic from 1916 to 1924, a marine captain named Charles F Merkel became notorious as the Tiger of Seibo; he personally tortured one prisoner by slashing him with a knife, pouring salt and orange juice into the wounds, and then cutting off the man's ears. Merkel killed himself in jail after, rumor had it, a visit from two marine officers who left him a gun with a single bullet in it. When word of such abuses reached the United States, it caused a public uproar. In the 1920 election the Republican presidential candidate, Warren G. Harding, sought black votes by denouncing the "rape" of Hispaniola perpetrated by a Democratic administration. This kind of criticism is not so different from the questions raised today about US treatment of Taliban or Iraqi prisoners.

American troops must take great care to avoid heinous conduct, not only for moral but also for practical reasons. If imperialists are provoked into too many grisly reprisals--as the French were in Algeria, or the Americans in Vietnam--support for their enterprise back home is likely to evaporate. And it is also much harder to win the "hearts and minds" of uncommitted civilians if you are routinely torturing or killing their relatives. Some mistaken shootings notwithstanding, this is a danger that US troops have largely avoided in Afghanistan and Iraq.

It is inevitable that any nation bent on imperialism will encounter setbacks. The British army suffered major defeats with thousands of casualties in the first Anglo-Afghan War (1838-1842) and the Anglo-Zulu War (1879). This did not appreciably dampen Britain's determination to defend and extend its empire. If Americans cannot adopt a similarly tough-minded attitude, they have no business undertaking nation building. This is not to suggest that America should sacrifice thousands of young men for ephemeral goals, but that policymakers need to recognize that all military operations run certain risks, and the United States should not flee at the first casualty. More important, Washington should not design these operations (as it did with the occupation of Haiti in 1994) with the primary goal of producing no casualties. That is a recipe for ineffectuality

THE IMPERIAL IMPERATIVE

Given the costs, moral and material, what is the case for undertaking imperialism at all? It is not so different today from 100 years ago. There is the economic argument: the United States can add areas such as Central Asia and the Balkans to the world free-trade system, within which America prospers. (These regions might seem like economic basket cases today, but so, a few decades ago, did Taiwan and South Korea. Both have prospered under US military protection.) There is also the idealistic argument: the United States has a duty to save people from starvation, ethnic cleansing, and tyranny. This is a direct descendant of the "white man's burden," except today it is not limited to whites or to men but extends to everyone in the West. If these were the only reasons for

America to undertake nation building, then it would be a hard sell, as indeed it was for large segments of the public in the 1990s. But since 9-11, another argument for imperialism has come to the fore: national security.

We can only wonder what might have happened if, after the Soviet Union was driven out in the early 1990s, the United States had helped build Afghanistan into a viable state. It might not have become the home of the Taliban and Al Qaeda, and the World Trade Center might still be standing.

This is only speculation, of course. But in the Balkans we can already see a payoff from nation building undertaken by the United States and its allies. The violence that claimed some 300,000 lives during the breakup of Yugoslavia is over. Kosovo, Macedonia, Croatia, Serbia, Slovenia, and Bosnia live in a state of uneasy peace under the eyes of Western troops. Aside from saving lives, there is another reason for the United States to take satisfaction in this outcome: Islamic extremists, who migrated to the Balkans in the early 1990s to help their fellow Muslims in Kosovo and Bosnia resist Serb oppression, have been denied a toehold in the region. NATO troops have been able to arrest and deport a number of terrorist suspects in Albania and Bosnia before they could blow up American installations. If US troops had never intervened in the first place, it is likely that the Balkans would have turned into another Afghanistan, a refuge for terrorists, and this one located near the heart of Europe. Similar action may be necessary to drain other potential swamps that breed crime and violence. In Iraq, in particular, the United States has an opportunity to begin transforming an entire region--the Middle East--that has emerged as the greatest threat to American security since the demise of the Soviet Union.

Any call for a renewed campaign of nation building by Western states is likely to run into an obvious objection: Did imperialism not go out of style decades ago, when European administrators were chased out of one colony after another? True enough. Europeans found that the cost of ruling third world countries whose young men were fired up by nationalist doctrines was too high to pay. Then, too, in the wake of the Holocaust, the racist assumptions that had justified a small number of whites ruling over millions of non-white people lost their intellectual respectability. The British withdrew more or less gracefully from most of their empire, while the French fought to keep Vietnam and Algeria and suffered humiliating defeats. If the Europeans, with their long tradition of colonialism, have found the price of empire too high, what chance is there that Americans, whose country was born in a revolt against empire, will replace the colonial administrators of old?

Not much. The kind of imperial missions that the United States is likely to undertake today are very different. The Europeans fought to subjugate "natives"; Americans will fight to bring them democracy and the rule of law. (No one wants to put Iraq or Afghanistan permanently under the Stars and Stripes.) European rule was justified by racial prejudices; American interventions are justified by self-defense and human rights doctrines accepted (at least in principle) by all signatories to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. European expeditions were unilateral; American missions are usually blessed with international approval; whether from the United Nations, NATO, or simply an ad hoc coalition. Even the US intervention in Iraq this year, widely held to be "unilateral," enjoys far more international support (and hence legitimacy) than, say, the French role in Algeria in the 1950s.

This is not to suggest that American attempts at nation building are destined to be easy or painless. Dealing with local warlords is a difficult task that, if mishandled, can lead to disaster, as in Lebanon in 1983 or Somalia in 1993. Nor has pacifying Iraq proved as easy as some optimists expected. Many months after the fall of Saddam Hussein's government, guerrillas continue to attack US troops and continue to inflict casualties. Still, it is

important to note that these days the bulk of ordinary people are likely to support, at least in the beginning, an American peacekeeping presence in their country. From Kosovo to Afghanistan and even to most parts of Iraq (especially those areas dominated by Kurds and Shiites), GIs are seen as liberators, not oppressors. Many inhabitants of these war-torn lands want American troops to stay as long as possible. Unfortunately many policymakers in Washington, and many lawmakers on Capitol Hill, pine for an early "exit strategy" from places like Iraq and Afghanistan. The question is whether America will have the long-term staying power to leave a positive legacy from its recent experiments in nation building.