

Sorrows of Empire

By Chalmers Johnson | November 2003

Although tyranny, because it needs no consent, may successfully rule over foreign peoples, it can stay in power only if it destroys first of all the national institutions of its own people.

Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*

With the fall of Baghdad, America's dutiful Anglophone allies—the British and Australians—are due for their just rewards: luncheons for Blair and Howard with the Boy Emperor at his “ranch” in Crawford, Texas. The Americans fielded an army of 255,000 in Iraq, the British 45,000, and the Australians 2,000. It was not much of a war—merely confirming the antiwar forces' contention that an unchallenged slaughter of Iraqis and a Mongol-like sacking of an ancient city were not necessary to deal with the menace of Saddam Hussein. But the war did leave the United States and its two Sepoy nations much weaker than they had been before the war—the Western democratic alliance was seemingly irretrievably fractured; a potentiality for British leadership of the European Union went up in smoke; Pentagon plans to make Iraq over into a client state sundered on Sunni, Shiite, and Kurdish realities; and “international law,” including the Charter of the United Nations, was grievously weakened. Why the British and Australians went along with this fiasco when they could so easily have stood for something other than might makes right remains a mystery.

The United States has been inching toward imperialism and militarism for many years. Disguising the direction they were taking, American leaders cloaked their foreign policy in euphemisms such as “lone superpower,” “indispensable nation,” “reluctant sheriff,” “humanitarian intervention,” and “globalization.” However, with the advent of the George Bush administration in 2001, these pretenses gave way to assertions of the Second Coming of the Roman Empire. “American imperialism used to be a fiction of the far-left imagination,” writes the English journalist Madeleine Bunting, “now it is an uncomfortable fact of life.”¹

On March 19, 2003, the Bush administration took the imperial step of invading Iraq, a sovereign nation one-twelfth the size of the U.S. in terms of population and virtually undefended in the face of the awesome array of weapons employed against it. The U.S. undertook its second war with Iraq with no legal justification and worldwide protests against its actions and motives, thereby bringing to an end the system

of international order that existed throughout the cold war and that traces its roots back to seventeenth century doctrines of sovereignty, non-intervention in the affairs of other states, and the illegitimacy of aggressive war.

From the moment the United States assumed the permanent military domination of the world, it was on its own—feared, hated, corrupt and corrupting, maintaining “order” through state terrorism and bribery, and given to megalomaniacal rhetoric and sophistries while virtually inviting the rest of the world to combine against it. The U.S. had mounted the Napoleonic tiger and could not get off. During the Watergate scandal of the early 1970s, the president's chief of staff, H. R. Haldeman, once reproved White House counsel, John Dean, for speaking too frankly to Congress about the felonies President Nixon had ordered. “John,” he said, “once the toothpaste is out of the tube, it's hard to get it back in.” This homely metaphor by a former advertising executive who was to spend 18 months in prison for his



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own role in Watergate fairly accurately describes the situation of the United States.

The sorrows of empire are the inescapable consequences of the national policies American elites chose after September 11, 2001. Militarism and imperialism always bring with them sorrows. The ubiquitous symbol of the Christian religion, the cross, is perhaps the world's most famous reminder of the sorrows that accompanied the Roman Empire—it represents the most atrocious death the Roman proconsuls could devise in order to keep subordinate peoples in line. From Cato to Cicero, the slogan of Roman leaders was “Let them hate us so long as they fear us.”

Four sorrows, it seems to me, are certain to be visited on the United States. Their cumulative effect guarantees that the U.S. will cease to resemble the country outlined in the Constitution of 1787. First, there will be a state of perpetual war, leading to more terrorism against Americans wherever they may be and a spreading reliance on nuclear weapons among smaller nations as they try to ward off the imperial juggernaut.

Second is a loss of democracy and Constitutional rights as the presidency eclipses Congress and is itself transformed from a co-equal “executive branch” of government into a military junta. Third is the replacement of truth by propaganda, disinformation, and the glorification of war, power, and the military legions. Lastly, there is bankruptcy, as the United States pours its economic resources into ever more grandiose military projects and shortchanges the education, health, and safety of its citizens. All I have space for here is to touch briefly on three of these: endless war, the loss of Constitutional liberties, and financial ruin.

Allegedly in response to the attacks of al Qaeda on September 11, 2001, President Bush declared that the United States would dominate the world through absolute military superiority and wage preventive war against any possible competitor. He began to enunciate this doctrine in his June 1, 2002, speech to the

cadets of the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, and spelled it out in his “National Security Strategy of the United States” of September 20, 2002.

At West Point, the president said that the United States had a unilateral right to overthrow any government in the world that it deemed a threat to American security. He argued that the United States must be prepared to wage the “war on terror” against as many as sixty countries if weapons of mass destruction are to be kept out of terrorists’ hands. “We must take that battle to the enemy, disrupt his plans and confront the worst threats before they emerge.” Americans must be “ready for pre-emptive action when necessary to defend our liberty and to defend our lives In the world we have entered, the only path to safety is the path of action. And this nation will act.” Although Bush did not name every single one, his hit-list of sixty possible target countries was an escalation over Vice President Dick Cheney, who in November 2001, said that there were only “forty or fifty” countries that United States wanted to attack after eliminating the al Qaeda terrorists in Afghanistan.²

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At West Point, the president justified his proposed massive military effort in terms of alleged universal values: “We will defend the peace against threats from terrorists and tyrants. We will preserve the peace by building good relations among the great powers. And we will extend the peace by encouraging free and open societies on every continent.” He added an assertion that is demonstrably untrue but that in the mouth of the president of the United States on an official occasion amounted to the announcement of a crusade: “Moral truth is the same in every culture, in every time, in every place.”

In his *National Security Strategy*, he expanded on these goals to include “America must stand firmly for the non-negotiable demands of human dignity; the rule of law; limits on the absolute power of the state; free speech; freedom of worship; equal justice; respect for women; religious and ethnic tolerance; and respect for private property.” In the preamble to the

strategy, he (or Condoleezza Rice, the probable actual author) wrote that there is “a single sustainable model for national success”—America’s—that is “right and true for every person in every society. ... The United States must defend liberty and justice because these principles are right and true for all people everywhere.”

The paradoxical effect of this grand strategy is that it may prove more radically disruptive of world order than anything the terrorists of September 11, 2001, could have hoped to achieve on their own. Through its actions, the United States seems determined to bring about precisely the threats that it says it is trying to prevent. Its apparent acceptance of a “clash of civilizations”—wars to establish a moral truth that is the same in every culture—sounds remarkably like a *jihad*, even to its basis in Christian fundamentalism. Bush seems to equate himself with Jesus Christ in his repeated statements (notably on September 20, 2001) that those who are not with us are against us, which duplicates Matthew chapter 12, verse 30, “He that is not with me is against me.”

Implementation of the *National Security Strategy* will be considerably more problematic than its promulgation and contains numerous unintended consequences. By mid-2003, the United States armed forces were already seriously overstretched, and the U.S. government was going deeply into debt to finance its war machine. The American budget dedicated to international affairs allocates 93% to the military and only 7% to the State Department, and does not have much flexibility left for further military adventures.³ The Pentagon has deployed a quarter of a million troops against Iraq, several thousand soldiers are engaged in daily skirmishes in Afghanistan, countless Navy and Air Force crews are manning strategic weapons in the waters off North Korea, a few thousand Marines have been dispatched to the southern Philippines to fight a century-old Islamic separatist movement, several hundred “advisers” are participating in the early stages of a Vietnam-like insurgency in Colombia and elsewhere in the Andean nations, and the U.S. currently maintains a military presence in 140 of the 189 member countries of the United Nations, including significant deployments in twenty-five. The U.S. has military treaties or binding security arrangements with at least thirty-six countries.⁴

Aside from the financial cost, there is another constraint. The American people are totally unwilling to accept large numbers of American casualties. In order to produce the “no-contact” or “painless dentistry” approach to warfare, the Pentagon has committed itself to a massive and very expensive effort to computerize battle.⁵ It has spent lavishly on smart bombs, battlefield sensors, computer-guided munitions, and extremely high performance aircraft and ships. The main reason for all this gadgetry is to keep troops out of the line of fire.

Unfortunately, as the conflicts in both Afghanistan and Iraq have demonstrated, ground troops follow in the wake of massive aerial bombing and missile attacks. The first Iraq War produced four classes of casualties—killed in action, wounded in action, killed in accidents (including “friendly fire”), and injuries and illnesses that appeared only after the end of hostilities. During 1990 and 1991, some 696,778 individuals served in the Persian Gulf as elements of Operation Desert Shield and Operation Desert Storm. Of these 148 were killed in battle, 467 were wounded in action, and 145 were killed in accidents, producing a total of 760 casualties, quite a low number given the scale of the operations.

However, as of May 2002, the Veterans Administration (VA) reported that an additional 8,306 soldiers had died and 159,705 were injured or ill as a result of service-connected “exposures” suffered during the war. Even more alarmingly, the VA revealed that 206,861 veterans, almost a third of General Schwarzkopf’s entire army, had filed claims for medical care, compensation, and pension benefits based on injuries and illnesses caused by combat in 1991. After reviewing the cases, the agency has classified 168,011 applicants as “disabled veterans.” In light of these deaths and disabilities, the casualty rate for the first Gulf War is actually a staggering 29.3%.

A significant probable factor in these deaths and disabilities is depleted uranium (or DU) ammunition, although this is a hotly contested proposition. Some researchers, often paid for by the Pentagon, argue that depleted uranium could not possibly be the cause of these war-related maladies and that a more likely explanation is dust and debris from the blowing up of Saddam Hussein’s chemical and bio-

logical weapons factories in 1991, or perhaps a “cocktail” of particles from DU ammunition, the destruction of nerve gas bunkers, and polluted air from burning oil fields. But the evidence—including abnormal clusters of childhood cancers and birth defects in Iraq and also in the areas of Kosovo where the U.S. used depleted-uranium weapons in the 1999 air war—points primarily toward DU. Moreover, simply by insisting on employing such weaponry, the American military is deliberately flouting a 1996 United Nations resolution that classifies DU ammunition as an illegal weapon of mass destruction.

DU, or Uranium-238, is a waste product of power-generating nuclear-reactors. It is used in projectiles like tank shells and cruise missiles because it is 1.7 times denser than lead, burns as it flies, and penetrates armor easily, but it breaks up and vaporizes on impact—which makes it potentially very deadly. Each shell fired by an American tank includes between three and ten pounds of DU. Such warheads are essentially “dirty bombs,” not very radioactive individually but nonetheless suspected of being capable in quantity of causing serious illnesses and birth defects.⁶

In 1991, U.S. forces fired a staggering 944,000 DU rounds in Kuwait and Iraq. The Pentagon admits that it left behind at a bare minimum 320 metric tons of DU on the battlefield. One study of Gulf War veterans showed that their children had a higher possibility of being born with severe deformities, including missing eyes, blood infections, respiratory problems, and fused fingers.

Aside from the damage done to our own troops and civilians by depleted uranium, the United States military remains committed to the most devastating forms of terror bombing, often without even a pretense of precision targeting of militarily significant installations. This aspect of current American military thinking can be found in the writing of Harlan

Ullman, a high-ranking Pentagon official and protégé of General Colin Powell, who advocates that the United States attack its enemies in the same way it defeated Japan in World War II. He writes, “Super tools and weapons—information age equivalents of the atomic bomb—have to be invented. As the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki finally convinced the Japanese Emperor and High Command that even suicidal resistance was futile, these tools must be directed toward a similar outcome.” Ullman is the author of the idea that the U.S. should “deter and overpower an adversary

through the adversary’s perception and fear of his vulnerability and our own invincibility.” He calls this “rapid dominance” or “shock and awe.” He once suggested that it might be a good idea to use electromagnetic waves to attack peoples’ neurological systems and scare them to death.⁷

The United States government has other ways to implement its new world strategy without getting its hands dirty, including what it and

its Israeli allies call “targeted killings.” During February, 2003, the Bush administration sought the Israeli government’s counsel on how to create a legal justification for the assassination of terrorism suspects. In his 2003 State of the Union speech, President Bush said that terrorism suspects who were not caught and brought to trial have been “otherwise dealt with” and observed that “more than 3,000 suspected terrorists have been arrested in many countries, and many others have met a different fate. Let’s put it this way: they are no longer a problem to the United States and our friends and allies.”⁸

High-tech warfare invites the kind of creative judo the terrorists of al Qaeda utilized on September 11. Employing domestic American airliners as their weapons of mass destruction, they took a deadly toll of innocent American bystanders. The U.S. worries that they might acquire or be given fissionable mate-

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rial by a “rogue state,” but the much more likely source is via theft from the huge nuclear stockpiles of the United States and Russia. The weapons-grade anthrax used in the September 2001 terrorist attacks in the United States almost certainly came from the Pentagon’s own biological stockpile, not from some poverty stricken Third World country. The U.S. government has probably solved the case but is too embarrassed by it actually to apprehend those responsible and bring them publicly before a court of justice.⁹ Meanwhile, the emphasis on using a professional military with its array of “people-zappers” will only strengthen the identification between the United States and tyranny.

If the likelihood of perpetual war hangs over the world, the situation domestically in the United States is no better. Militarism and imperialism threaten democratic government at home just as seriously as they menace the independence and sovereignty of other countries. Whether George Bush and his zealots can ever bring about a “regime change” in Iraq or any other country is an open question, but there is no doubt that they already have done so within the United States. In keeping with the Roman pretensions of his administration, Bush often speaks as if he were a modern Caligula (the Roman emperor who reigned from 37 to 41 AD and who wanted to appoint his horse to the Senate). In the second presidential debate on October 11, 2000, Bush said, “If this were a dictatorship, it’d be a heck of a lot easier, just so long as I’m the dictator.” A little more than a year later, he replied to a question by the *Washington Post* journalist Bob Woodward, “I’m the commander—see, I don’t need to explain—I do not need to explain why I say things. That’s the interesting thing about being president. Maybe somebody needs to explain to me why they say something, but I don’t feel like I owe anybody an explanation.”¹⁰

Bush and his administration have worked zealously to expand the powers of the presidency at the expense of the other branches of government. Article 1, Section 8, of the Constitution says explicitly that “The Congress shall have the power to declare war.” It prohibits the president from making that decision. The most influential author of the Constitution,

James Madison, wrote in 1793, “In no part of the Constitution is more wisdom to be found than in the clause which confides the question of war or peace to the legislature, and not the executive department. ... The trust and the temptation would be too great for any one man.”¹¹ Yet, after September 11, 2001, President Bush unilaterally declared that the nation was “at war” against terrorism, and a White House spokesman later noted that the president “considers any opposition to his policies to be no less than an act of treason.”

During October 3 to 10, 2002, Congress’s “week of shame,” both houses voted to give the president open-ended authority to wage war against Iraq. It permitted the president to use any means, including military force and nuclear weapons, in a preventive strike against Iraq as soon and as long as he—and he alone—determined it to be “appropriate.” The vote was 296 to 33 in the House and 77 to 23 in the Senate. There was no debate; the members were too politically cowed to address the issue directly. Thus, for example, Sen. Pete Domenici (R-New Mexico) spoke on the hundredth anniversary of the 4-H Club; Sen. Jim Bunning (R-Kentucky) talked about the Future Farmers of America in his state; and Sen. Barbara Boxer (D-California) gave Congress a brief history of the city of Mountain View, California.¹²

Equally serious, the Bush administration arrogated to itself the power unilaterally to judge whether an American citizen or a foreigner is part of a terrorist organization and can therefore be stripped of all Constitutional rights or rights under international law. President Bush’s government has imprisoned 664 individuals from forty-two countries, including teenage children, at a concentration camp in Guantánmo, Cuba, where they are beyond the reach of the Constitution. It has also designated them “illegal combatants,” a concept unknown in international law, to place them beyond the Geneva Conventions on the treatment of prisoners of war. None of them has been charged with anything: they are merely captives.

The key cases here concern two native-born American citizens—Yasir Esam Hamdi and Jose Padilla. Hamdi, age 22, was born in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, but raised in Saudi Arabia. The Pentagon claimed he was captured fighting for the Taliban in

Afghanistan, although in a more detailed submission it acknowledged that he surrendered to the Northern Alliance forces, the warlords whom the U.S. had paid to fight on its side, before he engaged in any form of combat. Padilla is a Brooklyn-born American of Puerto Rican ancestry. He was arrested by federal agents on May 8, 2002, at O'Hare Airport, Chicago, after he arrived on a flight from Pakistan. He was held for a month without any charges being filed or contact with an attorney or the outside world. On the eve of his appearance in federal court in New York, he was hastily transferred to a military prison in Charleston, South Carolina; and President Bush designated him "a bad guy" and an "enemy combatant." No charges were brought against him, and attempts to force the government to make its case via writs of *habeas corpus* were routinely turned down on grounds that the courts have no jurisdiction over a military prisoner.

A year and a half after September 11, 2001, at least two articles of the Bill of Rights were dead letters—the fourth prohibiting unwarranted searches and seizures and the sixth guaranteeing a jury of peers, the assistance of an attorney in offering a defense, the right to confront one's accusers, protection against self-incrimination, and, most critically, the requirement that the government spell out its charges and make them public. The second half of Thomas Jefferson's old warning—"When the government fears the people, there is liberty; when the people fear the government, there is tyranny"—clearly applies.¹³

The final sorrow of empire is financial ruin. It is different from the other three in that bankruptcy may not be as fatal to the American Constitution as endless war, loss of liberty, and habitual official lying; but it is the only sorrow that will certainly lead to a crisis. The U.S. proved to be ready *militarily* for an Iraq war, maybe even a North Korea war, and perhaps an Iran war, but it is unprepared

economically for even one of them, much less all three in short succession.

The permanent military domination of the world is an expensive business. During fiscal year 2003, the U.S.'s military appropriations bill, signed on October 23, 2002, came to \$354.8 billion. For fiscal year 2004, the Department of Defense asked Congress for a 4.2% increase, to \$380 billion. When the budget was presented, sycophantic Congressmen spent most

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of their time asking the defense secretary if he was sure he did not need even more money and suggesting big weapons projects that could be built in their districts. They seemed to say that no matter how much the U.S. spends on "defense," it will not be enough. The next largest military spender is

Russia, but its military budget is only 14% of the U.S.'s total. To equal current U.S. expenditures, the military budgets of the next twenty-seven highest spenders would have to be added together. The American amounts do not include the intelligence budgets, most of which are controlled by the Pentagon, nor do they include expenditures for the Iraq war or the Pentagon's request for a special \$10 billion account to combat terrorism.

Estimates of the likely cost of the war vary widely. In 2002, President Bush's first chief economic adviser, Lawrence Lindsey, guessed that attacking Iraq—an economy somewhat smaller than that of Louisiana's—would require around \$140 billion, but this figure already looks too small. In March 2003, the Bush administration said it would need an additional amount somewhere between \$60 billion and \$95 billion just to cover the build-up of troops in and around Iraq, the ships and planes carrying them, their munitions and other supplies, and the fuel they will consume. These figures did not include the costs of the postwar occupation and reconstruction of the country. A high-level Council on Foreign Relations study concluded that President Bush has failed "to fully describe to Congress and the American people

the magnitude of the resources that will be required to meet the post-conflict needs” of Iraq.¹⁴

The first Gulf war cost about \$61 billion. However, American allies such as Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Germany, Japan, and South Korea chipped in some \$54.1 billion, about 80% of the total, leaving the U.S.’s financial contribution a minuscule \$7 billion. Japan alone contributed \$13 billion. Nothing like that will happen again. Virtually the entire world is agreed that if the lone superpower wants to go off in personal pursuit of a preventive war, it can pick up its own tab. The problem is that the U.S. is becoming quite short on cash. The budget for 2003 forecasts a \$304 billion federal deficit, excluding the costs of the Iraq war and shortfalls in the budgets of programs that are guaranteed, backed, or sponsored by the U.S. government. Virtually all of the U.S. states face severe fiscal shortages and are pleading with the federal government for bailouts, particularly to pay for congressionally mandated anti-terrorism and civil defense programs. The Congressional Budget Office projects federal deficits over the next five years of over \$1 trillion, on top of an already existing government debt in February 2003 of \$6.4 trillion.¹⁵

In my judgment, American imperialism and militarism are so far advanced and obstacles to its further growth have been so completely neutralized that the decline of the U.S. has already begun. The country is following the path already taken by its erstwhile adversary in the cold war, the former Soviet Union. The U.S.’s refusal to dismantle its own empire of military bases when the menace of the Soviet Union disappeared, combined with its inappropriate response to the blowback of September 11, 2001, makes this decline virtually inevitable.

There is only one development that could conceivably stop this cancerous process, and that is for the people to retake control of Congress, reform it and the election laws to make it a genuine assembly of democratic representatives, and cut off the supply of money to the Pentagon and the Central Intelligence Agency. That was, after all, the way the Vietnam War was finally brought to a halt.

John le Carré, the novelist most famous for his books on the role of intelligence services in the cold war, writes, “America has entered one of its periods of historical madness, but this is the worst I can remember: worse than McCarthyism, worse than the Bay of Pigs and in the long term potentially more disastrous than the Vietnam War.”¹⁶ His view is somewhat more optimistic than mine. If it is just a period of madness, like musth in elephants, we might get over it. The U.S. still has a strong civil society that could, at least in theory, overcome the entrenched interests of the armed forces and the military-industrial complex. I fear, however, that the U.S. has indeed crossed the Rubicon and that there is no way to restore Constitutional government short of a revolutionary rehabilitation of American democracy. Without root and branch reform, Nemesis awaits. She is the goddess of revenge, the punisher of pride and arrogance, and the United States is on course for a rendezvous with her.

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