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An American Empire! If You Want It instead of Freedom, Part 2

by Richard M. Ebeling

Also making a case for an imperial role for the United States is Deepak Lal, professor of international development studies at the University of California, Los Angeles. Lal has long been a leading opponent of central planning and regulation in developing countries and a strong advocate of free markets and competition. On October 30, 2002, he delivered a lecture at the American Enterprise Institute in Washington, D.C., entitled “In Defense of Empires.” Lal argues that empires undeservedly have had a bad name in the 20th century. In his view, “The major argument in favor of empires is that, through their pax, they provide the most basic of public goods — order — in an anarchical international society of states.”

Among the great tragedies resulting from the First World War, he believes, was the beginning of the end to the European, and especially British, empires around the world. In the 19th century they had created and maintained a system of international free trade, protected property rights, legally enforced contracts, and secured a global arena for investment and economic development. In their place arose political and economic nationalism that created the chaos of the 1920s and 1930s, which culminated in the Second World War. Now, in the wake of the end of the Cold War, the world is confronted with the same dangers that it faced in the period between the world wars: nationalist and ideological demagogues and religious fanatics. America, therefore, must accept the mantle of global empire for the good of the world and its own well-being. It must do for mankind in the 21st century what the European empires did in the 19th century.

Lal’s only hesitation is that America may try to make the world over in its own image in the pursuit and maintenance of its empire. He says, “The so-called universal values being promoted by the West are no more than the culture-specific, proselytizing ethic of what remains at heart Western Christendom,” including the “Western value” of liberty. But “many civilizations have placed social order above this value, and again it would be imperialistic for the West to ask [other cultures and religions] to change their ways.” He fears that “if the West ties its moral crusade too

closely to the emerging processes of globalization and modernization, there is the danger that there will be a backlash against the process of globalization.” And this “potential cultural imperialism poses a greater danger to the acceptance of a new Pax America in developing countries, particularly Muslim countries” than any other basis for resisting America’s political and military dominance around the world. But for discussing what America’s purpose is in having and managing a global empire, Lal concludes that a good beginning “would be the acceptance in domestic politics that the U.S. is an imperial power.”

History does not dictate an American empire

History does not dictate that America continue on its path to global empire, any more than history dictated the “inevitability” of class conflict leading to a socialist paradise or that history dictated the domination of the world by an Aryan “master race.” If America follows this direction it will be because the political elite and the American public choose to do so. It will be a conscious decision, and not fate or destiny. The question, then, is, is this a course that is best for America and the world? And the answer, for any advocate of freedom, must be that it is not.

Deepak Lal tries to minimize the cost of an American Empire by pointing out that in 2000 defense spending in the United States amounted only to a little over 3 percent of GDP. But even ignoring the increases in the defense budget that have been proposed by the Bush administration, that still comes out to about \$300 billion. Over 10 years that would add up to \$3 trillion: expressed differently, the American people will work and pay taxes that will equal almost one and a half years of the cost of government over the next decade just to maintain and man the American Empire. And this ignores the deaths of Americans and the destruction of their property during the coming years due to any wars or terrorist acts that result from resistance or retaliation by those opposed to the American Empire.

Lal also wistfully looks back to the British Empire of the 19th century and wants America to now serve as the global guardian of international order and commerce. But he confuses Empire with the prevailing ideology of that earlier time. In spite of having an empire, the British in particular were wedded to the political philosophy of classical liberalism. They managed their global empire as a free-trade zone, not because it was an empire but because the intellectuals and most people in Britain believed in the idea and ideal of personal liberty and economic laissez faire.

During these years of the 19th century, other European powers, especially the French, the Germans and the Belgians, ran their empires along far more exclusionary and protectionist lines meant to serve special-interest groups in the mother country. All of these empires were

maintained and ruled with military force, with the French, Germans and Belgians in particular often extremely brutal and cruel in their domination of the subject groups in Africa and Asia. And even the British could be merciless in their use of force to maintain their empire against the wishes of their subject peoples.

The ideas of free trade and economic liberalism do not guide governments in the 21st century, including the government of the United States. Domestic economic interventionism, the welfare state, and political regulation of commerce and trade through international organizations are the guiding ideas of our time, as they have been for many decades. And the foreign-policy pronouncements and policy goals of the Bush administration suggest no change in direction. (See *Freedom Daily*, "[A Regulated-Economy Agreement for the Americas](#)" [July 2001] and "[The Dangers and Costs of Pax America](#)" [December 2002].) Abusive power, corruption, and special interest favoritism are inseparable from the interventionist-welfare state, whether it is practiced in domestic or foreign policy. Thus, there is little reason to think that America would be any more humane in its imperial role than the European empires of the past.

Unilateralism and the imperial presidency

Krauthammer's American unilateralism in a unipolar world is more than unilateral action by the U.S. government in other parts of the world. It means presidential unilateralism in making those decisions here at home. As Bob Woodward points out in his book *Bush at War*, when he asked the president whether he ever felt that he needed to explain anything as he planned a possible attack on Iraq, Bush replied, "Of course not. . . . I'm the commander — see, I don't need to explain — I don't need to explain why I say things. That's the interesting thing about being the president. Maybe somebody needs to explain to me why they say something, I don't feel like I owe anybody an explanation." What remains of the traditional conception of limited, constitutional government with separation of powers and Congressional responsibility for declarations of war when the president of the United States believes that he owes no one any explanation for what he says or does when it comes to military conflict? With Empire inevitably comes the "imperial presidency."

Krauthammer may be the schizophrenic victim of his own rhetoric when he says that America has no desire to remake the rest of the world and in the next breath says that the task of America's empire is to spread Western-style democracy and values around the world. But this goal, as Lal correctly sees, threatens the conception of a benign American Empire that polices the peace and guarantees the order of the world while attempting to indoctrinate the people of Asia, Africa, and the Middle East to accepting superior Western thinking and ideals. The issue is not whether the traditional Western ideas of liberty, property, rule of law, and limited government are good and

right — any classical liberal considers that they are. The issue is whether they can be force-fed to people not willing to accept them on those terms. And it is hardly imaginable that the American people, flush with the hubris of imperial power and indoctrinated themselves by intellectuals and political leaders about the “destiny” and “historical mission” of America to save the world, will be willing to bear the financial and human burden of Empire if they do not think that the end product will be to make the rest of the world just like the “superior” U.S. of A.

This means that Empire will be a costly, frustrating, and burdensome affair. It will require the expenditure of many lives and vast fortunes. And it will undermine what remains of the free society and the market economy here in the United States. At the end of “The Rise of Empire,” Garrett said that the American people could have back their limited, constitutional republic if they were willing to fight for it. But people fight only when they know what they have lost and what they still have to lose.

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