

The American Burden: Imperialism in the New Millennium

by John C. Rock

“Subjugating the enemy’s army without fighting is the true pinnacle of excellence.”
Sun Tzu, The Art of War

As Americans, we are faced with a new task and an old burden. In the post-September 11th world we are reminded that we are the sole surviving superpower, much of the world resents us, and our allies may be more reliant upon us than we are of them. In a very true sense, we stand—perhaps not quite alone—but certainly we stand *first*. We are the vanguard in the new War on Terror. A position gained equally from being the first large-scale victim, and by being the first to take swift action against terrorism and terrorist regimes. We fielded the troops, we toppled the Taliban, and now, as we debate invading Iraq, we have yet another burden to shoulder. One we’d rather ignore or at least avoid.

It is a burden which we once embraced as part of the responsibility of being a global superpower. Our burden was seen as a task appropriate and befitting of America and her Western allies. In the past, this massive undertaking required the vast amounts of courage, compassion, and natural resources that made America a world power. In truth we still possess those qualities. Now, however, we struggle to overcome several decades’ worth of accumulated social baggage: national self-deprecation, cynicism, guilt, and political hand-wringing. Together, these socio-political forces have required us to put down our burden and walk away.

Times change, and we have entered a new era of asymmetrical warfare, brushfire wars and the looming threat of global terrorism. A new era where no place is safe, where the gulf of two oceans can not defend us from attack. America must face an unpleasant truth, and must pick up an abandoned burden. We must return to a policy of Nation Building, to *Imperialism* in the fullest and best sense. Where we have dislodged enemies and toppled regimes, where we have hunted and rooted out terrorists, where we have brought the sword of war, so too must we now bring the plowshares of peace—an enforced peace, a regulated and controlled peace, a *Pax Americana*, but a peace nonetheless. This is the burden we wish to ignore, turn away from, or deem impossible, implausible. It is a burden we now find sullied and dirty, unpopular in our overly-sensitive, overly cautious, “politically correct” environment.

We fear to accept the full responsibility for our half-hearted actions. Whenever we topple terrorist regimes and claim that by doing so we have made the world a safer, better place, then we have an *obligation* and a *duty* to see that claim actualized. And the only way to ensure stability is to build a strong, regulated and controlled infrastructure, create a new nation build upon our institutions and policies. To do less is to risk failure as the new, weak state slides back into chaos. We can not leave fledgling interim governments to limp around on their own while we “support” them by throwing millions of tax dollars at them in the hopes of improving their situation. Instead, we must rebuild what we destroy, and create strong, new structures to replace the chaos. Alas, we do not want this responsibility, or it is no longer seen as our job, or our duty. We can help, but only by “halves”, and we are not allowed to do anything fully.

Yet, by failing to take this *required* next-step, by leaving the full task unfinished we are only leaving ourselves open to more hardship. Our efforts will stretch into an exercise in futility, an exacerbated, needlessly prolonged extension of the War on Terror. A war that will become either the *Millennial War*, a war fought well into future centuries, or worse, the *Final War*. A war wherein we see weapons of mass destruction loosed on civilian populations, with increasingly deadly retaliation for those atrocities, and then the final movement towards the annihilation of our global civilization.

Sounds alarmist? I think not. In the wake of our first triumph in the War on Terror, after our defeat and ousting of the Taliban, we have spent some \$366M in US aid to Afghanistan¹. But what has this money bought us? Is Afghanistan stabilized? Is it on the path to recovery? Or is it already showing signs of coming apart at the seams as tribal warlords—allies we have made treaties with—shell and attack other Afghani villages? Have our war efforts made it *impossible* or at least *highly unlikely* that Afghanistan will be free from the deprivations suffered in the past? Deprived of food, water, health care, education, what changes have we made to prevent the desperate conditions that nurture and support terrorist extremism and eventually breed anti-US and anti-West sentiments? Is the “new” Afghanistan any better than post-Soviet Afghanistan? Is it akin to Japan and Germany after WWII? Will it ride out of the rubble and grow into the democratic, free, and flourishing countries the others have become? Can Afghanistan achieve similar greatness if we simply throw enough money at it? Or will it merely become the next Chad, where our money gets twisted and subverted, where the conditions of daily life never improve, and more generations grow up despising the West and extolling the virtues of *Jihad*?

Clearly, we have a difficult task before us. We must not simply pump money into Afghanistan; we must take an *active role* in shaping and developing the country. We need to *impose* our institutions and bring order and structure to the region. By doing this, we free the people to become *global citizens*. Free them from hunger and starvation, from the chaos of failing governments and instable or corrupt infrastructures. We must bring American institutions and businesses, and we must back them with troops on the ground. Business and institutions will create and stabilize the infrastructure of the nation, allowing for a sustainable economy.

If we sit back, pledge money but no direct support, then we risk watching Afghanistan slide back into the old quagmire—taking millions of support dollars, and uncounted lives with it. Without imposed stability, it is only a matter of time before old feuds and power struggles rekindle. The Taliban did not grow out of nothing; it came from sentiments of despair and loss fueled by life in the ruination of post-Soviet Afghanistan.

“Once a nation descends into violence, its people focus on immediate survival rather than on the longer term. Saving, investment, and wealth creation taper off; government officials seek spoils for their cronies rather than designing policies that might build long-term prosperity. A cycle of poverty, instability and violence emerges.”²

The Taliban—one of the most repressive and abhorrent regimes—was the inheritor of the devastation left behind by the Soviet Union. Consider how different this world would be if only *someone* had, at that *critical* period, stepped in and begun a policy

¹ figure taken from CNN broadcast ticker.

² Sebastian Mallaby, “The Reluctant Imperialist...” *Foreign Affairs* March/April 2002.

of nation building. By ignoring Afghanistan and letting it fall into itself, without *directed* guidance and support, without Imperialism, the world abandoned Afghanistan to destitution, and left it ripe for further abuse. Instead of freedom, democracy, and economic expansion, Afghanistan was left to the mercy of a radical Islamic-fundamentalist regime. A regime funded and backed by Saudi terror-money, directed and *influenced* by Osama bin Laden.

The Taliban misappropriated the hopes of a nation and their desire to get out of the cycle of violence and poverty that was daily life under Soviet occupation. Instead of freedom, there was severe restriction, oppression of women, poverty, hunger and destitution. All these conditions are perfectly suited to creating a nation of desperate people, people with nothing to lose, people who would follow and support terrorism against the US, the West, or whomever else the people of Afghanistan were manipulated to hate.

If we do not take an *active* hand in shaping tomorrow's Afghanistan, then it is only a matter of time before someone with worse intentions and by harsher means will decide that country's fate. The new Afghan government, though a great first step, is not strong enough to stand on its own for very long. And until it is we need to support a structured democracy in Afghanistan, and teach the people how to be active and productive citizens of the modern *globalized* world. Afghanistan's people deserve the same freedoms and responsibilities that we enjoy. As the sole remaining superpower, we have the duty and obligation to them achieve stability, true freedom, and democratic rule—even if we have to *force* it on them, and force ourselves to accept it. We must carry the burden of nation building and with it the burden of being *proud* to be *imperialistic*. In a true sense, it is “kindler, gentler” imperialism one that encourages freedom and requires democracy. Modern nation building should be like a 21st century adaptation of Roman imperialism. Local traditions and self-governance are supported, tolerance is enforced, and a democratic Muslim state, capable of international commerce on a competitive level is the ideal.

The alternative to imperialism, unregulated and poorly supervised foreign aid, is a losing venture. Without a stable internal structure, without freedom from corruption and cronyism, the money will never bring the aid or the relief that the people deserve.

“If outsiders want to make a difference in this kind of environment, they must begin by building the institutions that make development possible. They must engage, in other words, in the maligned business of nation building.”³

Nation Building will not be easy, it will not be quick, and it may fail many times before it succeeds, but the end rewards justify the effort. We often face global opposition to many of our foreign policy decisions, and the world is still not so much a global village as it is a diverse collection of regional villages with contrasting levels of health, wealth and freedom. Even among our western allies America is often criticized both for our actions and our non-actions on the global stage. We both do too much and too little simultaneously. We are resented and we are feared by both friend and foe alike, and yet we are always asked for help and support when there is need. We are seen as the corruptor and protector, the invader and the defender, and there is some truth to all of this—for we *do* seek to change the world, and we *do* take actions to safeguard our interests—call it enlightened self-interest, but ultimately we take these actions in an effort

³ Sebastian Mallaby, “The Reluctant Imperialist...” *Foreign Affairs* March/April 2002.

to increase the levels of safety, stability and freedom worldwide. We recognize that secular democracy is a means to achieve these good ends, and we further understand that before we can lead the world, we must defend ourselves. And, if others would join in and help us then we would welcome their camaraderie—we go it alone, typically, because everyone else would *rather* we do it alone than get involved. Imperialism is merely an extension of defense; it is making an old enemy into a new and sustained ally. It brings with it the best and truest type of peace—a *lasting peace*. Witness Germany and Japan, our two best examples of nation building.

And, lest we seem to lack humility in the face of the greatness of the challenge before us, let us witness our failed attempts in the Balkans and Chad. The Balkan failure cost us \$15Billion in military intervention between 1991 and 2000.⁴ Afghanistan has a long tradition of inter-tribal warfare and unrest which will complicate efforts to unify the country. Plus, the length of Soviet occupation and the related devastation combined with the latest damage from the Taliban and from our own intervention will be costly to rebuild. It may require far more years of effort than the American attention span is willing to support.

Furthermore, we have a distinctive need to include our efforts with those of our allies, and we seek to work together as partners in the emerging world culture. We must work in concert with the other players and share the spotlight. To do less would be to invite serious rebuke, criticism that may well jeopardize the very goals we seek to establish. Therefore, we must strive to work together, to forge unions, coalitions of like-minded support for our plans of nation building. We must demonstrate both its necessity and our ability to handle it fairly and equitably. We must press for multilateral imperialism, and set it in motion only with consent and support. We need to demonstrate the worthiness and nature of our character to a suspicious and untrusting world. We must recognize their fears while proving ourselves and our intentions to be genuine—perhaps even proving it to ourselves. Because, in the end, we will have to convince the American people that this *is* our responsibility, and that it *is* both worthwhile and achievable. And we must hold ourselves to our responsibility and finish what we start. There can be no half-way, if we give our word, we must hold true to it. We cannot hope to win the hearts and minds of the world if we back out and step aside when things turn messy and ugly—as it most likely will at some stage of the game. Once committed, we must remain committed.

This seems like a lot to ask of us, and a lot to ask of the world—and have no doubt, for it *is* a lot to ask of everyone. The costs are high, as are the risks. But this is the landscape of the new world, it is not yet the “desert of the real”, but it could become as barren and hopeless if we allow it.

Most importantly, let us never forget that in this new post-September age, as we confront the War on Terror we must recognize and eradicate the *roots of terror*—poverty, fear, repression, oppression and the deliberate misinformation which creates hatred and fuels modern terrorism. If we wish to eliminate terror, then we must attack it at its source, and this is done by building strong nations where poverty is replaced by opportunity, and where America can be seen as the gentle giant, the helping hand rather than the oppressive fist. Build confidence in America and build confidence in the world. First Afghanistan, then Iraq, and then the other nations of terror that form the Axis of

⁴ Sebastian Mallaby, “The Reluctant Imperialist...” *Foreign Affairs* March/April 2002.

Evil, each one needs to be re-created and reshaped by American imperialism. Sound Orwellian? Wake up to reality, if you do not see a great gulf widening between those who wish to build a world and those who wish to destroy it, then you were not watching what happened on September 11th. Despite the problems with NAFTA and the WTO and various other sore spots we agree that protesting is acceptable, and that freedom of speech is valuable. We recognize there is another gulf widening between the average American citizen and the powers of Corporate America, but we are working on it. There are always problems with any system of rule, or in any collection of people, but some decide to protest and discuss and analyze, and others decide to bomb and kill to show their displeasure. It is *not* a war between Islam and the West; it is a war between *terrorism* and the *world*.

Imperialism may not be popular, it may not be pleasant, but nonetheless it is a *necessity* we can no longer overlook if we are serious about winning this War on Terror. Terrorism stems from hatred fueled by poverty and misunderstanding, destitution fills the ranks of terrorist armies and together they threaten global destruction. If we are to subjugate the enemy's army, if we are to truly defeat all aspects of global terrorism then it must be done without fighting endless wars—it must be done through building nations. If we can achieve peace, prosperity, and harmony-with-diversity then we have achieved the true pinnacle of excellence.