

## **“The World and the US: Empire or Community?”**

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Professor Lincoln P. Bloomfield

To make sense of that question, we have to ask: What is the world really like? And how does the US react to that world?

The Middle East combines all the neuralgic issues – terrorism, oil supply, and a worst-case nightmare of an unwanted religious–cultural war. Because it is currently the obsessive focus of foreign policy, let me deal with it first.

There is no question that 9/11 changed a lot of things. After a half century of Cold War, the security threat to US is not from states, but from shadowy networks of militant Islamists, mostly Arab but also radical Muslims in the Philippines, Indonesia and elsewhere – America-hating fanatics with no return address who are committed to punishing the non-Muslim world, with particular attention to Jews, Christians, and Westerners in general. Their distorted interpretation of the Koran encourages martyrdom, so they don't fear death, and traditional deterrence doesn't work.

The correct response to global terrorism has been a global police operation with extensive international cooperation in counter-espionage, money-tracking, and punishment of states that harbor terrorists, like Afghanistan under the Taliban. There have been some successes, but it's a long twilight struggle. I don't think we are the ones who make life hopeless and opposition futile for the millions of underemployed youth who get brainwashed in the Saudi-financed radical Islamist mosques and madrassas .

Al Qaeda means “the base”. But the real base for contemporary terrorism is a huge historic disconnect between the West and the Middle East, which skipped the whole era of Enlightenment and industrial revolution that fostered rationalism and a middle class that transformed the Western world and ultimately much of Asia. The result is stagnant societies whose high birthrates produce young men with nothing to do and nowhere to go – a great source of fodder for radical movements under the banner of an angry and hate-filled version of Islam. Their real enemy is their own corrupt and autocratic regimes. But their convenient target is the infidel American who interferes with, defends, and now tries to reform their countries..

In the long run only a real education plus jobs for the young and an opening civil society will start the needful transformation that in turn will isolate the terrorists. In the meantime, Iraq increasingly looks like a costly diversion from the central fight against political-religious radicalism and violence, and has in fact generated new candidates for suicide bombings of innocent Iraqis.

But look around: The world outside the Middle East is still there, and a preoccupation with terrorism should not be allowed to mask the rest of reality. Everything isn't terrorism – including some secession and independence movements in the Middle East, South Asia, and China which governments are trying to crush by piggybacking on the war on terrorism. The big countries in each region are still crucial to American interests.

Above all, we shouldn't lose our focus on sort-of-democratic Russia and sort-of-communist China.

Russia is on an erratic path to an unknown future which we hope will be democratic and peaceable. It has a power-grabbing government, a shrinking population, and the possibility of becoming a primary supplier of U.S. oil. But with 1000-year history of autocratic rule and about 20,000 nukes, many in need of better security before they are stolen, plus resentment of the US edging into the Caucasus and pushing NATO to Russia's borders, the prospects are mixed.

China on the contrary has a growing population and some likelihood of becoming a superpower. It is also on the path to an unknown future, particularly if Taiwan creates an unwanted confrontation. China learned from the Soviet collapse, and has tried to do the opposite of what I saw in Moscow in 1989 when, under Gorbachev, the political space was opened up while the economy foundered and there was nothing for the people to eat. We are big trading partners, and the huge US trade imbalance is offset by China buying up US T-bills to finance the massive deficit created by this administration. So the future there is also clouded.

America's long-term allies in what Rumsfeld called Old Europe may not still be the dominant global force. But Europe as a whole is America's major ally, trading partner, and main cultural ancestor.

For the rest of the globe, economic and financial globalization is an overwhelming fact with well-known plusses and minuses, particularly for the poorest countries. Poverty still grips a billion people who live on less than one dollar a day, and our record on development aid falls short of what one expects of a rich man who discovers he has built his mansion in the slums. With five percent of the world population, the enormously productive US generates a third of the global product – and consumes a quarter of the world's energy output, much of it on American highways. So the US is obviously central to the global economic, financial, and communication marketplace..

We need to see the way in which the US reacts to this outside world against the backdrop of history. One approach has been isolationism, as in the 1920's, with the stance of serving as a model for others to emulate while avoiding going abroad "in search of monsters to destroy" which John Quincy Adams famously warned against. Much of the world has in fact copied the US Constitution and many foreigners still crave an American education or job. The US as role model alternates with periods of activism as crusader and missionary, with the premise that everyone must be shown how they would benefit from our values and our form of government, personified by Woodrow Wilson and now George W. Bush.

American attitudes toward cooperation with other nations similarly oscillates between two poles. The US led the way in the extraordinary period between 1945 and 1950 of building multilateral institution like the UN, the World Bank and Fund,. and NATO, on the wreckage of World War II. It was based on the premise that an international community existed in some form and should be fostered and united in common causes. But in 2000, Bush election adviser Prof. Condoleezza Rice wrote that the international community is a phantom, and for the next two years the White House acted as if the super-powerful US could get along just fine without friends, or the mythical international

community, with the president asserting that the US does not need anyone's permission slip to pursue its interests.

The 2003 invasion of Iraq was the high water mark for American unilateralism. Having thrown Secretary Powell a bone by going to the UN Security Council, the US refused to continue UN inspections we now know were effective, or to delay its planned attack, and went to war with support from only four out of 15 members of the Security Council.

For full disclosure, I personally think the action would have been justified if Iraq's threat to the United States had been as genuine as the White House claimed, and I also feared that the Security Council's failure to act on its 16 resolutions calling for Iraq to comply, all flouted by Saddam Hussein, might send the UN system into the ash-heap of history like the League of Nations. The military action was unprecedented in its efficiency and in its historically unprecedented efforts to spare civilian casualties, propaganda to the contrary notwithstanding. But the lack of serious post-war planning led to disaster after disaster, and reverses in Iraq and other mounting global issues have forced Washington to rethink its arrogant stance. Indeed, in virtually every speech Secretary of State Rice now approvingly invokes the international community.

If the conservatives still privately dismiss multilateralism as a irritating drag, liberals engage in unrealism in the face of its obvious limitations. To me the surprising thing is the number of US national objectives that for practical reasons we have to deal with collectively. This is most visible in economic, social, technical, and financial sectors where coordinated action by the UN system of agencies has proven indispensable even for the wealthiest and most powerful. Examples rarely noticed by critics include preventing the spread of epidemics and confronting global health scourges like SARS, AIDS, and malaria (which kills far more people than AIDS); standardizing world-wide air traffic through common safety procedures and language ( in English) without which every international flight would become a lethal crash; fighting the global drug trade; coping with financial crises and humanitarian disasters; monitoring elections in countries trying for democracy such as Iraq; bringing social, economic, and political development to the poor, and organizing multiple programs to fight terrorism.

As someone once said, the tragedy of the United Nations is that it has become indispensable before it has become effective. Reforming the UN sometimes looks like the work of Penelope at her loom, woven by day and unwoven by night. But the UN is all we have, a little bit like the garden of Eden, when Eve appeared distracted and a worried Adam asked her "Is there someone else?"

Finally, is today's US really an empire, as some assert? It certainly is the preponderant power in the world and can't pretend to be smaller or weaker than it is. The American military is stronger than a dozen of the next largest countries and others demand US leadership even if they don't like it when they get it. US trade, investment, and culture are everywhere, which is itself resented. But as a historian I just don't see us meeting the imperial test of staying power, long-term commitment, territorial ambitions, or a desire to rule over subject people elsewhere. I can't think of one other empire with less desire to annex other people's territory, or which has expended more blood and treasure to protect other nations without asking more than the right to invest capital, hire

cheap labor, extract oil, recycle TV sitcoms, and sell information services and soft drinks. Winston Churchill was, as usual, right in his reported dictum that America can be counted on to do the right thing—after trying everything else.

My own definition of leadership includes confronting the unavoidable issues of security in a dangerous and resentful world – and matching that with a resumption of this country's traditional aspirations for a rule of law we also follow, genuine collaboration with others as we did in that five year postwar period even though our partners were flat on their backs, acting with, in the words of our own Declaration, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind. That's the kind of empire I want to live in.