

## **“The Emperor Has (no) Clothes? An Autopsy”**

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Niall Ferguson, *Colossus: The Rise and Fall of the American Empire* (Penguin Books, New York, 2005), pp. 386.

Deepak Lal, *In Praise of Empires: Globalization and Order* (Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2004), pp. 270.

Joseph S. Nye Jr., *The Paradox of American Power: Why the World's Only Super Power Can't Go It Alone* (Oxford University Press, Inc., New York, 2002), pp. 222.

G. John Ikenberry, *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order After Major Wars* (Princeton University Press, Princeton N. J., 2001), pp. 293.

### **I – Imperial Power as a Problem Statement**

The term ‘Empire’ and its conceptualisation thereof have been debated by scholars for long. The debate continues till date and is likely to be so in the foreseeable future, till at least a satisfactory explanation emanates from it. While the Marxist-Leninist school of thought, contextualising it under various stages of evolution of society, explains it as the highest form of capitalism, eventually leading to the withering away of the state system and bringing in a classless society, liberals and others have found it difficult to explain the broad contours of imperialism. In the absence of a generally agreed definition, contemporary scholarship, especially in the West, tends to explain the term by taking into account relative economic, political and military capabilities of a particular state vis-à-vis others. Inherent ambiguities in such efforts invariably lead to coinage of many other terms like ‘superpower’, ‘hyperpower’, ‘hegemon’, ‘colossus’, or ‘primacy’. Problems

in definitions and approximate calculus of power notwithstanding, contemporary scholarship in the West has been pondering over the nature and direction of American power and its implications for the rest of the world.

With the end of the Cold War, the US established its global supremacy. Although military efforts by states around the world, including the US, witnessed drastic reductions in practically every sector of activity, the overall outcome has resulted in the growing power gap between the only superpower and the rest. On the eve of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the US had amassed so much of power and such unprecedented levels of global reach, that it was already referred to be the undisputed 'colossus' for the next several decades. Yet, at the very beginning of the dawn, a globally active non-state actor – Al Qaida – proved how vulnerable America could be.

The debate about the nature and likely future direction of American power has, in recent times, preoccupied the minds of scholars. While some have compared and contrasted current American power with the imperial powers in the past and come to near conclusions about the superiority of the former in many respects, others have argued that such massive accumulation of power in one country could lead to unbridled brazenness directly or indirectly on the global community and could even lead to serious internal vacuum, implications of which could be disastrous for both the US and the world at large.

Is the US a real Empire? If so, what are its broad features? Does the US behave like an Empire? If so, what are the evidences and resultant implications of such behaviour? Is the world with such an Empire desirable or will the world be better off without it? These are some of the many fundamental questions that scholars and thinkers have been contemplating for quite some time. The quest to find reasonable answers to such trivial queries seems insatiable. Yet, recent scholarship has tried to offer some tentative explanations as well as a few suggestive pointers to such questions. As the complex universe of 'Empire Project' blends both subjective and objective determinants, a review of even a few critical studies becomes all the more important.

An attempt has been made here to review four significant works on aspects of Imperial power and more specifically of the power of the US. All four scholars are well known in their fields of activity. Niall Ferguson is

currently a Professor of International History at Harvard University and has at least a dozen well acclaimed books to his credit, most of which display precisely distilled arguments based on important historical evidences. Professor Ferguson's latest book, *Colossus: The Rise and Fall of the American Empire*, examines the pros and cons of American imperialism. Deepak Lal is the James S. Coleman Professor of International Studies at the UCLA. As a seasoned development economist with long years of advisory experience with many international agencies as well as various governments, his book, *In Praise of Empire: Globalisation and Order* explores the twin themes of empires and globalisation and discusses the place of the US in the current global order. Professor Joseph S. Nye Jr. serves as the Dean of the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University. He, like the previous two, needs no introduction. His book, *The Paradox of American Power: Why the World's Only Super Power Can't Go It Alone*, argues that 'hard power' must be blended with 'soft power' for a super power like the US to advance and realize its national interests. G. John Ikenberry is Professor of Government and International Affairs at Georgetown University. Professor Ikenberry's scholastic work, *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order After Major Wars* applies institutional theory of order formation and examines the problem of order in a global context and more importantly, the role of the US in it after the Cold War, especially in the later part of his book.

## II – The Grand US Empire Project

The US today is in many ways like an Imperial power. It is vastly wealthy. The might of its wealth is self-evident. It is militarily peerless, both in qualitative and quantitative terms. Half a trillion dollar devoted to military efforts by the US in 2004-05 says it all. It has a huge cultural reach. Its reach is evident from the fact that even the farthest corner of or the smallest state in the world at least subconsciously thinks about it while taking any major decision. In a span of just four years, Americans have intervened militarily against three states in the Balkans, Southern Asia, and the Middle East. As both Ferguson and Nye Jr. argue that whatever the rationale, each US incursion has led to a change of political regime, military occupation, and an attempt at institutional transformation euphemistically described as nation-building. Yet by comparison with other empires, it often struggles to impose its will beyond its shores. Reasons for this are many. Its successes

in exporting American institutions and values to foreign lands have been outnumbered by its utter failures.

In many respects, this American predominance shares the same aspirations and ambitions as the last British Empire. Despite originating in a revolt against British imperialism, the US inherited many of its begetter's defining characteristics. Styling itself as an "empire of liberty," the fledgling Republic embarked on an astonishingly rapid colonisation of the central belt of the North American continent. If anything, the independent Americans expropriated indigenous peoples even more ruthlessly than they had as British subjects. However, as Ferguson argues, the differences between the British and American empires became more apparent as the US sought to extend its influence overseas. Its experiment with overt imperialism after 1898 had distinctly mixed results, ending unhappily in both the Pacific and the Caribbean, with the notable exceptions of Hawaii and Puerto Rico. The grand American project of 'expanding liberty' is continuing till date. If President Bush's speech to the Republican Party Convention, spelt out in the *New York Times* on September 2, 2004 and myriads of many such avowals convey anything, it is "the story of America is the story of expanding liberty". Putting in noble terms, "merica is not an Imperial Power", yet crudely put, "it is a liberating power", both Ferguson and Nye Jr. suggest that the differences in the meaning are starkly distinctive – the notion of expanding liberty is almost equated to Uncle Sam's tyranny on the vanquished.

The US has invaded and occupied many countries over the past two centuries. Yet in terms of their economic and political institutions, relatively few of these have evolved into anything remotely resembling miniature Americas or even shown to have followed the basics of democracy. Will things go any better in Kosovo, Afghanistan, or Iraq? And can President Bush live up to his implied threats to deal sooner or later with the other members of the "axis of evil," Iran and North Korea – to say nothing of Cuba, Libya, and Syria, which were added to the list of 'rogue states' in May 2002, or Burma and Zimbabwe, also singled out for presidential opprobrium in November 2003? At the moment, simply imposing order in Iraq is proving difficult enough, even with British and Polish assistance. The Grand American 'roadmap' after years of noble efforts still seems like a chimera.

The half-hearted and at times foolhardy adventures at several places seem to exemplify the limits of American power. But how does one explain these limits? Ferguson, Nye Jr. and Ikenberry have explored these limits at length in their respective works. By most conventional measures of power—economic, military, and cultural—there has never been an empire mightier than the US today. Its recent difficulties in achieving its foreign policy goals cannot simply be blamed on the Bush Administration's alleged diplomatic ineptitude, as argued by Lal. Rather, one needs fundamentally to rethink what one means by power. Often the very concept gets confused with that of other quite different things—wealth, weaponry, and a winning way with “soft power.” It is, in fact, perfectly possible to have a great deal of all these things, yet to have only limited power.

At least three fundamental deficits together explain why the US has been a less effective imperial power than its British predecessor. Ferguson says that they are its economic deficit, its manpower deficit, and – the most serious of the three – its attention deficit. The US has gone from being a net international creditor to being the world's biggest debtor: its net international liabilities are now equivalent to around a quarter of its gross domestic product. America's reliance on foreign capital is a balancing act on a very high wire. One plausible and troubling scenario is that foreign expectations could shift, leading to simultaneous pressure on the exchange rate and bond prices, with higher yields threatening American growth via mortgage rates and the housing market. But then, if Dick Cheney's explanation, “Reagan proved that deficits do not matter”, is taken seriously, then something somewhere is definitely wrong in Uncle Sam's thinking. Equally troubling is America's manpower deficit. There is undoubtedly something perplexing about the apparent shortage of American combat-effective troops at a time when the American prison population exceeds 2 million – 14 times the number of American troops in Iraq. Of the three deficits, however, it is the third that may prove the most difficult to overcome – namely, the attention deficit that seems to be inherent in the American political system and that already threatens to call a premature halt to reconstruction in both Iraq and Afghanistan. This is not intended as a term of abuse. The problem is systemic; it is the way the political process militates against farsighted leadership. Perhaps going back to understand the basics of ‘power’ and ‘morality’ and institutionalising both, could offer some help, as suggested by Ikenberry.

Does imperial denial matter? Ferguson argues that it does. Successful empire is seldom solely based on coercion; there must be some economic dividends for the ruled as well as the rulers, if only to buy the loyalty of local elites, and these dividends need to be sustained for a significant length of time. The trouble with an empire in denial, as argued by Ferguson, is that it tends to make two mistakes when it chooses to intervene in the affairs of lesser states. The first may be to allocate insufficient resources to the non-military aspects of the project. The second, and the more serious, is to attempt economic and political transformation in an unrealistically short time frame. At the moment, the US would seem to be making these mistakes in both Iraq and Afghanistan. These two points help explain why this vastly powerful economy, with its extraordinary military capability, has had such a disappointing record when it has sought to bring about changes of political regime abroad.

### **III – Strategic Retreat or Engagement in a Global Village**

Traditional, non-traditional or transnational threats such as war, terrorism, nuclear proliferation, and organised crime – to say nothing of disease pandemics, climate change, and water shortages – put a premium on cooperation, not competition, between states. Lal and Ferguson have dealt with these at length. The attractions of unilateralism are undeniable, since demanding allies can be more irksome than invisible foes, but a solo strategy offers little prospect of victory against any of these challenges; the successful prosecution of the “wars” against all of them depends as much on multilateral institutions as does the continuation of international free trade, as argued by all the authors. A great empire cannot live in splendid isolation. The isolationist strategy that the US followed during the initial phase of its civilization does not seem viable in today’s international conditions. In fact, American success after both the Second World War and the Cold War was closely linked to the creation, nurturing and extension of international institutions that at once limited and yet legitimised American power. The Kansas farmer’s observation, “I think we are trying to run the business of the world too much” is fine but its broad contours, if weaved into the mainstream thinking, could certainly spell disaster both for the US and others. On the other hand, a judicious combination of realist and liberal-institutional traditions forming the core of American grand strategy could well be contemplated by the American scholarship.

All empires devote a large chunk of financial resources for both internal and external stability. Without hefty investment in enforcing the rule of law, countries like Afghanistan and Iraq will stagnate and perhaps disintegrate. More importantly, nation-building with democratic values at the core is always a long arduous road that needs not only long-term involvement but also periodic assessment, as argued by Ikenberry and Lal. Afghanistan and Iraq being two important test cases for the grand American democracy project have thus far shown very little signs of assimilating alien ideas. Unless the US is prepared to radically alter its attitudes towards low-intensity conflict, it will have little option but to cooperate with the more generous Europeans. Unilateralism, like isolation, is not so splendid after all. Indeed, it is seldom a realistic option for an empire. The danger is that great-power cooperation could simply break down, not because of rivalry between the US and the European Union but because both lack the will to act beyond their own borders. The internal problems of these huge and complex entities may simply distract them from the problems of failed states and rogue regimes. In brief, as Nye Jr. argues, empires do desire to have complete control over the areas they dominate but seldom do they care to at least understand the nuances of long historical and local culture of their subjects. The distinctly modern ideas that flow from them rarely transform, although impinging in some segments, the local culture. The dual process of cultural imposition from outside power and the consequent process of assimilation within the society takes many a decade.

The paradox of globalisation is that, as the world becomes more integrated, so power becomes more diffuse. As Lal and Nye Jr. suggest, thanks to the dynamism of international capitalism, all but the poorest people in the world have significantly more purchasing power than their grandfathers dared dream of. The means of production were never more productive or – as China and India achieve their belated economic takeoffs – more widely shared. Thanks to the spread of democracy, a majority of people in the world now have markedly more political power. The democratic means of election were never more widely accepted as the optimal form of government. The means of education too are accessible in most countries to much larger shares of the population than was the case two or three generations ago; more people than ever can harness their own brainpower. All these changes mean that the old monopolies on which power was traditionally based—monopolies on wealth, political office, and

knowledge—have in large measure been broken up. Unfortunately, thanks to the proliferation of modern means of destruction, the power to inflict violence has also become more unevenly diffused.

#### **IV – Emperor’s Liberal Dilemma**

Critics of the great empires in general and the American imperial power in particular have singled out almost all the problems associated with imperialism, many of which have been expressed in the works of Ikenberry and Nye Jr. The list is endless as well as often so subjectively intertwined that even the imperial power itself becomes clueless about its duties. Take, for example, the case of exporting democratic values of an imperial power beyond its shores. Exporting democracy is a classic case of imperial dilemma. It has had success in the cases of Germany and Japan, yet its failure cases are too numerous to mention here. More than the willingness of the exporter, it is the willingness of the importer, the degree of which roughly weighs the success or failure of such projects. Would Iraq and Afghanistan, having long historical aversion to democratic traditions be prepared to embrace democracy? The answer seems as philosophically confusing as the query itself. What then does the imperial power do? Should it stop exporting democratic values, which as a desirable concept needs diffusion especially in the traditional societies? If so, how to undertake such difficult projects and taste success? Both the case for promotion of democracy and that too by an imperial power invariably invite criticism for obvious reasons.

Ferguson says that the world needs an effective liberal empire and that the US is the best candidate for the job. Economic globalisation is working. The rapid growth of per capita incomes in the world’s two most populous countries, China and India, means that international inequality is finally narrowing. But there are parts of the world where legal and political institutions are in a condition of such collapse or corruption that their inhabitants are effectively cut off from any hope of prosperity. And there are states that, through either weakness or malice, encourage terrorist organisations committed to wrecking a liberal world order. The number of such states, despite best efforts, is indeed increasing.

The US has good reasons to play the role of liberal empire, both from the point of view of its own security and out of straightforward altruism. In many ways too it is uniquely well equipped to play it, as observed by Ferguson. Yet for all its colossal economic, military, and cultural power,



the US still looks unlikely to be an effective liberal empire without some profound changes in its economic structure, its social makeup, and its political culture. Most importantly, as Ikenberry and Nye Jr. suggest, all Americans should ask themselves whether they themselves are willing to change at least in the mental and socio-spiritual realms in order to gain more legitimacy from the societies that they wish to transform? Whatever they choose to call their position in the world – hegemony, primacy, predominance, or leadership – Americans should recognise the functional resemblance between Anglophone power present and past and should try to do a better rather than a worse job of policing an unruly world than their British predecessors. In learning from the history of other empires, Americans will learn not arrogance but precisely that humility which, as a candidate for the presidency, George W. Bush once recommended to his countrymen. And finally, the question Americans must ask themselves is just how transient they wish their predominance to be. Although the barbarians have already knocked at the gates and even threatened to inflict the worst damage, relative imperial endurance or decline seems more likely to come from within than without.

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