

# An Air of Empire

By Leon Fuerth

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The word "empire" has been used fairly often as a metaphor to convey the global scope of American interests and of American military, economic and political influence. After the conquest of Iraq, however, it can be fairly argued that we shall have created not a figure of speech but a concrete reality.

First of all, we will have made clear that the United States answers to no authority other than itself when it comes to the use of military force. Moreover, the authority of the United States will be mostly indistinguishable from the personal will of its president. The Bush doctrine of preemption becomes a replacement for international law: Any president at any time in the future can decide to attack any country, provided only that he is satisfied that said country might at some point represent a direct threat to the United States.



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Second, the United States will have established itself as the dominant force at the geographic core of a region that, in turn, exercises tremendous leverage over the rest of the globe through the oil market. As occupying power, the United States will unilaterally assume responsibility for decisions that will determine the future course of Iraq's oil and gas industries. We become in effect a virtual member of OPEC, and one of the most powerful at that. So immense military power will be united with an equally impressive form of economic power. No, this war is certainly not about oil. But the peace that follows it will be another matter.

The fact that we will have acted out of fear of terrorism in an impulse of self-protection does not change the essential nature of this event for much of the rest of the world. What matters is the answer to a single question: Does the United States consider itself bound by any international obligation if that obligation is seen as an impediment to its will? The Bush administration will have difficulty saying otherwise, in view of its pattern of unilateral action, established well before the present crisis.

If war comes, we may be quickly victorious. And perhaps the president's sweeping vision of positive change throughout the Middle East will also come to pass. The more brilliant our success, however, the more deeply we will be feared. And the reason for that is not just the stunning demonstration of power in bringing it about but the fact that the government of the United States went out of its way to drive home one point: We are dominant, and dominant is as dominance does. That has its price.

Americans -- whether they support or oppose war with Iraq -- need to realize the consequences of the status we may shortly assume. The beginning of empire is the end of

commonwealth. We have already seen how that works in the failed bidding war the United States engaged in for the sake of support in the Security Council and from Turkey. The irony is that all along the United States has had every right to resume military operations against Iraq under existing Security Council resolutions, because Saddam Hussein was patently in breach of his commitments. Instead, the administration chose to base its actions on an unlimited assertion of an American right to make war at will.

Whether or not we intend to be an empire, we now present the aspect of one -- an appearance that has already contributed to the fracturing of our alliances by playing into the ambitions of those, such as the French and their followers, who believe their mission is to contain us. The administration knows that it is responsible for the reconstruction of Iraq after this war is over. But it does not appear to realize that it also must find a way to reconstruct another collateral casualty: the notion that America is part of a community of nations.

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