

BUSH IN BABYLON

The difference between the United States and the European imperialism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is that the former preferred to rule indirectly. Even where they fought major wars – Korea, Vietnam, Angola, Afghanistan – they preferred to be defending local regimes under threat from revolutions rather than ruling directly. Military bases were fine. But a whole apparatus of civilian rule, like that perfected by the British in India, was not Washington's style. When they did occupy a country and administer it, they could be as brutal as the French or the Spanish they were replacing. Two examples suggest themselves: Cuba and the Philippines.

In Cuba, the US helped to defeat the Spaniards, stayed for four years, brought the island's economy under their own control and then departed, leaving behind a semi-independent republic and the military base at Guantanamo Bay, currently being used as the Empire's prison and torture centre.

Benedict Anderson has provided a chilling account of the US occupation and colonisation of the Philippines and its impact on local society.¹¹² In 1898, President McKinley, encouraged by the press baron Hearst, declared war on Spain in Cuba and the Pacific. The enfeebled Spanish sold their Pacific property to the United States and, as the twentieth century dawned, the 'pacification' of the Philippines began in earnest. The native resistance was not insubstantial. The colonisation cost the United States 5,000 lives, which was all the more painful since the soldiers were overwhelmingly white. Among the Filipinos 20,000 were killed and 200,000 died from starvation and the plague. General Jake Smith, in command of 'pacifying' Samar, gave an order of which General von Trotha would have been proud: 'I want no prisoners. I wish you to kill and burn, the more you burn and kill the better it will please me.' One of his soldiers, a Sergeant Howard McFarlane, wrote to the *Journal* in

¹¹² Benedict Anderson, 'Cacique Democracy in the Philippines', in *The Spectre of Communism*, London and New York, 2000, pp. 192–226.

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Fairfield, Maine: 'On Thursday, March 29 [1900] eighteen of my company killed seventy-five nigger bolomen and ten of the nigger gunners ... When we find one that is not dead, we have bayonets.'¹¹³

The colonisation of the Philippines ended the semi-autonomy enjoyed by some of the Pacific islands and brought Muslim Mindanao under the control of Manila, with long-term repercussions. On the political front the United States created their own 'oligarchy of racketeers' composed of *meritizo* landowners who were now given the opportunity to buy the 400,000 acres that had been confiscated from the Catholic Church. Yes, when it suited colonial interests, expropriations were permissible. It was all for the greater good. A restricted franchise enabled the oligarchs to dominate their local Congress, and Filipino exports were allowed free, untaxed access through the tariff walls surrounding the United States. The oligarchy flourished, defended by its own private armies, while the majority of the population became even more impoverished. Many from the middle and lower-middle classes, unable to survive or confront the oligarchy, fled to the United States and elsewhere.

Decades later, Ferdinand Marcos destroyed the collective political power of the oligarchs and, with US backing, assumed absolute control, reducing the Philippines to a kleptocracy run by a self-centred, arbitrary, and capricious First Couple. In the countryside a semi-Maoist rural guerrilla movement led by the New People's Army began to garner support and inspire urban disquiet. Their struggle reawakened a popular national consciousness: the depiction of Marcos as an American *luta* (running dog) became a commonplace on the walls of Manila and in posters in other parts of the country. The scale of corruption and repression led to a massive revolt from below, which was hurriedly commanded by the

¹¹³ Ibid. Quoted from Leon Wolff, *Little Brown Brother*, London, 1960, pp. 305 and 360.

army and another oligarchic family, Cory Aquino, *née* Cojuangco, spoke of 'people's power' but was the daughter of the country's leading oligarch, and the rickety coalition of Left and Right that supported her soon collapsed. By 1990 the old pre-Marcos oligarchy of racketeers was firmly back in power. According to the *Philippine Daily Inquirer* survey after the 1987 national elections: 'Out of 200 House representatives, 130 belong to the so-called "traditional political families", while another 39 are relatives of these families. Only 31 Congressmen have no electoral record prior to 1971. ... Of the 24 elected senators ... the cast is largely made up of members of prominent pre-1972 political families.'¹⁴

Which of these fates awaits Iraq? Neither model is particularly suitable.

Is the Japanese variant any better? Jackal talk of Iraq becoming like post-war Japan is both irrelevant and ignorant. The question that is currently being discussed by scholars is whether Hirohito of Japan was a war criminal. And if so, why wasn't he tried as such and why did Washington's Viceroy, General Douglas MacArthur, insist on preserving the Chrysanthemum Throne after 1945? Also, contrary to accepted beliefs, there is much evidence to show that hostility to the Emperor-system existed in Japan throughout the 1920s. This denunciation by Uchiyama Gudō, a young priest of the Sōtō Zen sect, should have taught something to the occupying Americans:

The Big Bullock of the present government, the emperor, is not the son of gods as your primary school teachers and others would have

11+ *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 24 January 1988.

you believe. The ancestors of the present emperor came forth from a corner of Kyushu, killing and robbing people as they did [so]. They then destroyed their fellow thieves. ... Although this is well-known, university professors and their students, weaklings as they are, refuse to either say or write anything about it. Instead, they attempt to deceive both others and themselves, knowing all along the whole thing is a pack of lies. 115

Herbert Bix argues that the total involvement of Hirohito with the Japanese war machine and his obsessive desire for imperial expansion was always well known in Japan. A gigantic cover-up and sanitisation process was necessary in order to keep him on the throne. Hirohito was busy preparing his defence for the War Crimes Tribunal when he was informed that this would not be necessary.¹¹⁶

None of these examples would suit the recolonisation of Iraq. Time could certainly be bought by a version of the Marshall Plan, which

115. Quoted in *Hiroshio and the Making of Meiji-japan* by Herbert P. Bix, London, 2000. This insightful volume by a leading scholar should be required reading for Iraqi generals who idealise this particular occupation.

116 General Masachitane and his colleague Brigadier General Fellars were determined to shield Hirohito from the very moment their plane landed in Japan. Both men were violently anti-racial, regarding President Roosevelt and the New Deal in their own country as a crypto-communist plot. In addition, Fellars was notoriously anti-Semitic, citing information the Japanese High Command that the top adviser to Secretary of State Bryan was 'Cohen (a Jew and a communist) ... the most influential advocate of un-American thought in the United States.'¹ On 6 March 1946, Fellars summoned Admiral Yozai Mitsumasa and his interpreter Mizutaka Shuichi and informed them that the Soviet Union and some other Allied countries were insisting that Hirohito be punished as a war criminal. Fellars suggested that:

"To counter this situation, it would be most convenient if the Japanese side could prove to us that the emperor is completely blameless. I think the forthcoming trials offer the best opportunity to do that. Tojo, in particular, should be made to bear all the responsibility at his trial. In other words, I want you to have Tojo say as follows: "At the imperial conference prior to the start of war, I had already decided to push for war even if His Majesty the Emperor was against going to war with the United States." That,

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immediately proceeds to rebuild the destroyed infrastructure, provide subsidised housing and other facilities and permit the Iraqi people to elect their own parliament. But the system of domination in force at the moment is not the New Deal but neo-liberal economics, which makes doing in Iraq what you dare not do at home a difficult operation, since it violates the rules of the World Trade Organisation/International Monetary Fund, which are crucial to maintaining tooth-and-claw capitalism in power elsewhere. Democracy creates further problems as it did in Iran in 1953. What if the Iraqis elect a government that insists on keeping oil under Iraqi control and demand the withdrawal of the occupation armies and US bases. It might not happen immediately, but the medium-term possibility is always present. That would necessitate another regime change.

These are the problems that now confront the Empire and they will become even more pressing if the US moves in the direction of Iran. The more intelligent of the mainstream political analysts in the United States are much more aware of this than the ostrich-liberals who refuse to accept the reality of what confronts them.

In a recent book, Andrew J. Bacevich, a former military officer, now Professor of International Relations at Boston University, refusing to accept that the Bush administration represents any serious breach with the Clinton or Bush Sr years, raises a number of significant questions. The 'dirty little secret' of the Bush-Clinton-Bush years is the refusal to admit the scale of the imperial problem:

Holding sway in not one but several regions of pivotal geopolitical importance, disdaining the legitimacy of political economic principles other than its own, declaring the existing order to be sacrosanct, asserting unquestioned military supremacy with a globally deployed force configured not for self-defense but for coercion: these are the actions of a nation engaged in the governance of empire. Continuing

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to pretend otherwise – in the words of Reinhold Niebuhr, 'frantically avoiding recognition of the imperialism we in fact exercise' – won't make America's imperial problem any easier to manage and certainly won't make it go away.¹¹⁷

Every empire has, sooner or later, provoked a reaction. Whenever a despot – indigenous or proconsular – realises that nothing works any more, that the torture and misery he has inflicted on his subjects is not enough to save him, he becomes more and more paranoid. The false smiles of his advisers no longer deceive him. Underneath the mask on each and every face he can read the expectation of his decline and doom. That is why astrologers in the East usually predicted misfortune to all those who entered the service of a tyrant. The armed resistance in Iraq has been discussed earlier, but what of the political opposition to the Empire?

For a whole decade the *bien-pensants* and left-of-centre governments have sought to avoid the reality of US power by taking cover under the flimsy umbrella of the United Nations. The Empire was fine provided it consulted the Security Council or, at the very minimum, NATO. It was consulted the Security Council that was unacceptable. Or, as the much-esteemed imperial unilateralism that was unacceptable. Or, as the much-esteemed German philosopher Jürgen Habermas wrote after the fall of Baghdad: 'Let us not close our eyes before this revolution in world affairs: the normative authority of America lies shattered.'¹¹⁸

The arguments deployed by Habermas and others are important because they represent a significant sector of West European public

¹¹⁷ Andrew J. Bacevich, *American Empire: The Realities and Consequences of US Diplomacy*, Harvard, 2002, pp. 243–4.

¹¹⁸ Jürgen Habermas, 'What does the falling of the monument mean?', *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 17 April 2003.

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opinion. This view can be summarised as follows. The imposition of Western liberal hegemony is only justifiable if it conforms with international law. Pragmatists and opportunists in Europe, who are now bowing before accomplished facts and accepting the war in Iraq, are mistaken. The universalist core of democracy and the values attached to it contradict imperial demands that impose uniformity. The only way to curb unilateralist excesses is through the only existing world organisation and to further the development of international law, before which all are equal. If this is not done, the rule of law will suffer globally, and inside the United States it is already being undermined by the powers granted to the security services. And pre-empting comparisons with the Yugoslav war, Habermas writes:

The comparison with the intervention in Kosovo also offers no exoneration. It is true that an authorisation by the Security Council in this case was not reached either. But the retrospectively obtained legitimisation could be based on three circumstances: on the prevention – as it seemed at the time – of an ethnic cleansing in the process of taking place; on the imperative – covered by international law – of emergency assistance holding *erga omnes* for this case, as well as the incontrovertibly democratic and constitutional character of all the member states of the ad hoc military alliance.¹¹⁹

In other words, the Iraq war of 2003 was completely different in character. In response to Jürgen Habermas, one could pose a set of alternative questions. Given that US defiance of the UN constitutes the main argument against the war (this was the soft underbelly of the European peace movement) and Security Council approval a sanction of

¹¹⁹ Habermas, op cit.

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international law, let us see if we can unravel this problem. Does the United Nations Security Council constitute the Supreme Court of international law? If so, how can it implement some resolutions and not others. The UN and its predecessor, the League of Nations, were created to institutionalise the new status quo arrived at after two bloody conflicts – the First and Second World Wars. Both organisations were founded on the understanding that they would defend the right of nations to self-determination. In both cases their charters outlawed pre-emptive strikes and any attempts to occupy countries or change regimes. Both organisations suggested that the nation state had replaced empires.¹²⁰

The UN was created to police the Yalta Accords after the defeat of fascism. Its charter expressly prohibits the violation of national sovereignty except in the case of 'self-defence'. However, despite the presence of the Soviet Union, the UN was unable to defend the newly independent Congo against Belgian and US intrigue in the 1960s or to save the life of the Congolese leader Patrice Lumumba. And in 1950 the Security Council took advantage of a temporary Soviet boycott to authorise a US war in Korea. Under the UN banner the Western armies deliberately destroyed dams, power stations, and the infrastructure of social life in North Korea, plainly in breach of international law. The UN was also unable to stop the war in Vietnam. Its paralysis over the occupation of Palestine has been visible for over three decades. Nor was this masterly inactivity restricted to Western abuses. The UN was powerless to defend Hungary against the Soviet invasion (1956) or Czechoslovakia against the Warsaw Pact's decision to change the regime

¹²⁰ The League of Nations collapsed soon after the Italian fascists occupied Ethiopia. Mussolini defended his invasion of Albania and Abyssinia by arguing that he was removing the 'corrupt, feudal and oppressive regime' of King Zog/Faïle Sébastie and Italian news-reels showed grateful Albanians/Ethiopians applauding the entry of Italian troops. And of European civilisation?

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of that country (1968). Both Big Powers were, in other words, allowed to do their business in clear breach of the UN charter and without incurring sanctions.

With the US as the only military-imperial state, the Security Council today has become a venue for trading not insults, but a share of the loot. The Italian theorist most feared by the fascists of the last century predicted this turn of events with amazing prescience. 'The "normal" exercise of hegemony,' wrote Antonio Gramsci, 'is characterised by the combination of force and consent, in variable equilibrium, without force predominating too much over consent.' There were, Gramsci elaborated, occasions when it was more appropriate to resort to a third variant of hegemony, because between consent and force stands corruption-fraud, that is the enervation and paralyzing of the antagonist or antagonists.¹²¹ Here we have an exact description of the process used to try and win Russian support at the UN as revealed in a front-page headline in the *Financial Times* (4 October 2002): 'Putin drives hard bargain with US over Iraq's oil: Moscow wants high commercial price for its support'.

European allies shuffle their feet at excessive US 'unilateralism' – essentially this is a discomfiting failure to consult, which serves as a cover for European subordination. China and Russia bargain weakly in return for their favours in the Security Council. If these are not forthcoming, action is taken anyway.

The world has changed so much over the last two decades that the UN has become an anachronism, a permanent fig leaf for new imperial adventures. If it was genuinely representative of the present world order, it would have only one veto in the Security Council, that of the United States. Boutros Boutros-Ghali was sacked on Madeline Albright's insistence

121 Perry Anderson, 'Force and Consent', *New Left Review* 17, September/October 2002.

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for challenging the imperial will: he had insisted that it was the Rwandan genocide that needed intervention. US interests required a presence in the Balkans. He was replaced by the current incumbent, Kofi Annan is a weak placeman whose sanctimonious speeches may sometimes deceive an innocent European public, but not himself. He knows who calls the shots. He knows who provides the song-sheet. And the same United Nations provided retrospective sanction to the occupation of Iraq.¹²² That is why some (including the author) insisted that a UN-backed war would be as immoral and unjust as the one that was plotted by the Pentagon, because it would have been the same war. Likewise, the character of the Anglo-American occupation will not change simply because the Security Council has given it approval. All that does is bring the EU and some others (Lula in Brazil, Musharraf in Pakistan, Vajpayee in India, etcetera) back into line.

Jürgen Habermas and European public opinion was fully prepared to accept that the UN could be ignored in Yugoslavia because the 'ad-hoc alliance' which made war on that occasion consisted exclusively of 'democratic states'. But surely the Anglo-American alliance that captured Iraq is equally democratic. Bush and Blair are elected leaders. Even if doubt is cast on Bush's own election, what is clear is that he had the virtually unanimous support of both Senate and Congress as well as the Democratic Party, whose two biggest draws, Mr and Mrs Clinton, played an important role in rallying public opinion in favour of the war. Why should the fact that important democratic states in Europe

122 In a posthumous, but persistent, text, published in *Harper's Monthly* in 1916, Mark Twain described the process well: 'Next the statesmen will invent cheap lies, putting the blame upon the nation that is attacked, and every man will be glad of those conscience-soothing fables; and will diligently study them, and refuse to examine any refutations of them; and thus he will by and by convince himself that the war is just, and will thank God for the better sleep he enjoys after this process of grotesque self-deception.'

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(Germany, France, Belgium) opposed the war before it took place and the criteria.

The contrast with Yugoslavia is not as profound as imagined by Habermas. In fact those who 'invoke humanity' could argue that Saddam Hussein's regime was much worse than any of the post-1990 Balkan outfits. True, there was nothing to see on the TV screen, no bad images to mobilise the public, but that should not invalidate the argument. The same 'surgical precision' that was applauded in Yugoslavia was deployed in Iraq. Civilian casualties were relatively low. And the same Kantian reasoning applied in this case. This time, of course, when faced with a 'Blocked Security Council' and a blocked NATO, the United States decided to go ahead anyway and would have done so even without Blair. That much has become clear.¹²³ In a recent intervention, Habermas and Jacques Derrida have published a joint appeal for an independent European foreign policy. What policy? Which Europe? Unless the reality of US imperial power is understood it is difficult to mount a political challenge. Within the United States itself there are Empire loyalists who fear isolation. For them institutions such as the UN and NATO are useful devices to maintain a consensual Western hegemony and should not be treated in a cavalier fashion.¹²⁴ They have been used in the past and will be again.

¹²³ Danilo Zolo, *Invoking Humanity: War, Law and Global Order*, London and New York, 2002. This is one of the most effective critiques of 'humanitarian interventionism'.

¹²⁴ The most recent version of this argument is provided by Joseph S. Nye, 'US Power and Strategy After Iraq', in *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2003. Nye accepts the basic continuity in US foreign policy since Woodrow Wilson, but has these words of advice: 'Both the neo-Wilsonian and the Jacksonian strands of the new unilateralism tend to prefer alliance to a carte and to treat international institutions as toolboxes into which US policymakers can reach when convenient. But this approach neglects the ways in which institutions legitimize disproportionate American power. When others feel they have been consulted, they are more likely to be helpful.'

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And if Europe's left-liberal intellectuals and philosophers still doubt that the world in which we live is dominated by a single empire and its needs, one might suggest that they read Philip Bobbitt's impassioned defence of the US Empire. A Democrat himself, Bobbitt is a transatlantic academic with positions in Austin (Texas), Oxford, and Kings College, London, and has served four US Presidents in various capacities: Carter, Reagan, Bush the father, and Clinton, the last as Director of Intelligence on the National Security Council. Prior to and during the war on Iraq, Bobbitt became a familiar figure in Blairite Britain, fêted in the media and a regular visitor to 10 Downing Street. In other words, this is a man with some authority. What does his latest book tell us?

His message is upbeat. A Bismarckian revolution is underway in international relations and it was launched not by George W., but by Bill Clinton when he decided to intervene in the Balkans. Whatever the merits or demerits of the case, this intervention overrode traditional attitudes to national sovereignty in the name of humanity. In an interview with the *Guardian* after the occupation of Iraq, Bobbitt boasted of how it was he who had convinced Clinton of the need for a new doctrine to justify imperial policies in the post-communist world:

The US would intervene when the threat to our vital strategic interests was overwhelming and imminent; or when significant strategic interests and humanitarian concerns coincided; or, when a vital strategic interest was absent, humanitarian concerns were high and strategic interests were low.¹²⁵

¹²⁵ *Guardian*, 7 June 2003. The book is *The Shield of Achilles: War, Peace, and the Course of History*, by Philip Bobbitt, New York, 2002. For a devastating indictment of this work see Gopal Balakrishnan, 'Achilles Shield and the Market State', in *New Left Review* 23, September/October 2003.

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This aggressive agenda is now in place and one important reason to recognise the 'disproportionate power' of the American Empire is to aid the development of a political resistance and a proper alternative. The movement that is needed can only be effective if it is global, and if it understands that the neo-liberal legs on which the imperial giant walks are not as strong as capitalist witch-doctors like to suggest.

APPENDIX: CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS AND THE FIRST GULF WAR

Once upon a time there was a radical English journalist. Despite harbouring a crush on Margaret Thatcher (his little secret), he tired of life on the sceptred isle. Who can blame him? His huge talents, not to mention a watermelon-sized ego, could not be confined to an increasingly provincial medium-sized country in Northern Europe. He decided to shift continents. When he arrived in New York in the 1980s, my old friend and comrade, Alexander Cockburn, already established there as a writer and columnist, introduced the new arrival to New York society. Cockburn has barred me from writing of those early years. The more delicious morsels are being saved for his own memoirs. The crumbs offered me are too tasteless for a book of this sort, which I hope will be read by many old people. So I fast-forward.

Soon afterwards, Christopher H. began to write a regular column, 'Minority Report', for *The Nation*, a radical New York weekly. It appeared every fortnight and was a good column, even when one disagreed with its contents. It was often witty and unpredictable, except when the author adopted an unpleasant tone (shades of the future) towards anyone even mildly critical of George Orwell or Salman Rushdie, or anyone else. Hitchens had positioned on his own private pedestal. Pity the columnist who needs heroes.