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# *Imperialism Destroys the Constitutional Republic*

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Because of its sober and realistic assumptions about human nature and the human condition, the American republic of the Constitution of 1789 is not designed to do the big things typical of empires. It is especially not designed to do that which has most characterized empire: conquer. When America does pursue empire, it undermines the very fabric of its constitutional government. Imperial expansion pulls at the threads of constitutionalism, ripping away the supports of limited government: separated powers, federalism, and checks and balances. More importantly, the quest for empire, even in the modern ideological form of spreading democracy, liberty, and equality around the globe, diverts the American imagination from the center of constitutional politics and life. The unwritten constitution, the cultural foundation for constitution-

al government, ceases to concentrate its attention on what is primary to a modest republic: the soul, the family, the neighborhood, the school, the church, the community. It directs the imagination to a distant abstract world in which virtue becomes synonymous with global humanitarian crusading. It makes a spectacle of politics. The place of modest republicanism, by contrast, is local; its scale is proportionate to its modest objectives; it is threatened by the vulgarity of empire, which poisons the sensibilities of those who struggle to possess republican virtue.

To follow the path of empire is to transform American identity and self-understanding; it is to transform the constitutional regime itself. To borrow the language of Walter McDougall, in doing so, America ceases to be a promised land and becomes a crusader state.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Walter A. McDougall, *Promised Land, Crusader State: The American Encounter with the World since 1776* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1997).

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American crusaders like Woodrow Wilson and Herbert Croly recognized the inadequacy of the Framers' constitutional system for the work of political religion. They insisted that the cumbersome American constitutional system be reformed to empower government for the challenge of social and global transformation. Ironically, the more successful the Progressives have been in centralizing power, the less great by traditional standards America has become. The Framers did not design the American republic for imperial greatness, but when it functions as intended, it produces something even greater than empire: a free society with limited government and the rule of law.

But there is more to the special kind of American greatness bequeathed by the Framers. Due in large part to their variegated circumstances, Americans have been sensitive to the value of human diversity, appreciating that it may play a part in pursuing universality. The American motto, *e pluribus unum*, and the federal and decentralized character of American political institutions testify to this aspect of the American genealogy and character. In America, local communities and groups have been free, within limits, to find their own way to the good life. The kind of uniformity that stifles diversity, more common to unitary systems of government, is incompatible with America's historical past. Unity is found *through* diversity, because there is more than one road to the

common human ground.<sup>2</sup>

From the early days of America's formation, a contrary tendency has been present in the American imagination, one that looks disparagingly upon decentralized power and a multiplicity of communities. This view pushes toward uniformity as represented in Rousseau's notion of the general will. It insists on a monistic, allegedly virtuous uniformity that divides society and world into stark categories of good and evil. According to this view, Americanism is the best possible way of life for all people.<sup>3</sup> A recent form of this creed is reflected in the idea of Francis Fukuyama that history has "ended" in the sense that it is inconceivable that any society could surpass the American/Western achievement.<sup>4</sup> This ideology asks: Who wouldn't welcome American democracy, liberty, and equality? Isn't it obvious that so many people in the world live lives that are inferior to those of Americans? Why not spread the virtues of America? Why not globalize America? If we were not tone-deaf to the vulgarity of empire, we should hear the hubris that

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<sup>2</sup> See Claes G. Ryn, *A Common Human Ground: Universality and Particularity in a Multicultural World* (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 2003).

<sup>3</sup> For an early example of the tendency, which exists in tension with the spirit of constitutionalism, to view America as the "favorite land of heaven," see Richard M. Gamble, "The Last and Brightest Empire of Time": Timothy Dwight and America as Voegelin's 'Authoritative Present,' 1771-1787," *Humanitas* 20:1&2 (2007), 13-35.

<sup>4</sup> See Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992).

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animates questions like these. We should hear it as well in statements by David Frum and Richard Perle in their book *An End to Evil*: “A world at peace; a world governed by law; a world in which all peoples are free to find their own destinies: That dream has not yet come true, it will not come true soon, but if ever it does come true, it will be brought into being by American armed might and defended by American might too.”<sup>5</sup>

Alexander Hamilton knew that the Philadelphia Convention of 1787 had done something rare in the annals of history; it had produced, as he noted in *Federalist* 1, “good government from reflection and choice.” Such governments have been rare because they require the presence of modest men and women who can keep their desires within constitutional limits. Hamilton and other Framers noted the historical and international significance of their work. Did this boast imply an American mission to govern the world, an empire of some sort? No, Hamilton made it clear that it would be American “conduct and example,” not force, that convinced the world that governments could be established from reflection and choice. It would undermine that very point to suggest that America, once she had established her own government by reflection and choice, should then impose *by force* similar governments on others. Nor did Hamilton and the Framers suggest, as Thomas Paine and Thomas Jeffer-

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<sup>5</sup> David Frum and Richard Perle, *An End to Evil: How to Win the War on Terror* (New York: Random House, 2003), 239.

son might have done, that reflection and choice always lead to the same form of government. The Framers understood, as Orestes Brownson would put it much later, that “Forms of government are like the forms of shoes—those are best which best fit the feet that are to wear them.”<sup>6</sup>

The proponents of ideological Empire measure the success or greatness of their own regime by the extent to which the universal values of the state ideology are spread. The missionary zeal of this endeavor is present, for example, in David Gelernter’s argument for Americanism as the fourth great Western religion.<sup>7</sup> Gelernter argues that World War I illustrates America’s “democratic chivalry” and “the worldwide realization of the American Creed”—liberty, equality, and democracy for all mankind. This globalization of the American Way required a “global statement of faith and hope.” And what is this statement? “I believe in America.” This notion of the savior nation emerged in earnest with the Civil War and Lincoln’s reshaping of the American identity. Gelernter adds, “America’s participation in World War I was her attempt to act like the new chosen people, to set forth on a chivalrous quest to *perfect the world*; to spread liberty, equality, and democracy to all mankind.”

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<sup>6</sup> Orestes Brownson, “Constitutional Quarantees,” in *The Works of Orestes A. Brownson*, ed. Henry F. Brownson (Detroit: H. F. Brownson, Publisher, 1905), vol. XVIII, 260.

<sup>7</sup> David Gelernter, *Americanism: The Fourth Great Western Religion* (New York: Doubleday, 2007).

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America is a global humanitarian cause. According to Gelernter, America is a world religion “for the oppressed, the persecuted, and the simply idealistic all over the globe.”<sup>8</sup>

It is difficult to imagine a more romantic, utopian, and ideologically imperial conception of America than this one. The objective of Americanizing the world is closely connected with modern war, and its mass destruction of human life, property, and humanity is telling. Gelernter states that the U.S. “must use the evil of war to spread the good of liberty, equality, democracy.”<sup>9</sup> His ideological passion “to perfect the world” blinds him to the reality of war and its failure to perfect so much as one human being, never mind the world. America, in this conception of its role, is the new messiah with the ability to do what the Christian savior did not attempt, transform the order of being in history. This vision, permeated by nationalistic vanity, is repugnant to moral realists who understand the limits of politics and human nature.

Frum, Perle, and Gelernter represent a way of thinking that clashes with the American Framers’ classical and Christian realism. Unlike the Framers, they believe that evil can be eradicated. James Madison reminds us in *Federalist* 10 that some evils are “sown into the nature of man.” Rather than eliminating them, the best we can hope to do is control their effects.

An ideological aspiration to Em-

pire results from an obsession with politics, an attempt to subordinate all things to the political. There is more than a hint of imperial obsession in Walter Berns’s book *Making Patriots*. Berns argues that the American Founders, following Locke, created a regime in which “we are first of all citizens, and only secondarily Christians, Jews, Muslims, or any other religious persuasion.”<sup>10</sup> If this be true, then in America the ethical ground for civil disobedience or moral opposition to the state has been lost. That Berns is intent on placing the things of Caesar above the things of God is odd given the enormous suffering produced by similar efforts in the twentieth century. But this is a project typical of the Enlightenment mind: Devotion to God runs the risk of creating irrational spiritedness that engenders social and political conflict. Defuse religion, remove it from political life, and toleration and peace will follow. The work of Eric Voegelin suggests, however, that despiritualizing political and social life does not lead to toleration and peace but to the totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century. Berns and Gelernter are confident that ideological devotion to abstract principles like democracy, equality, and liberty can only have a civilizing effect on America and the world. Yet in this effort to eliminate political violence they inspire just what they claim to be combating by suggesting that world peace is gained by the forcible spread of American ideology.

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 147 (emphasis added), 156.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 156.

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<sup>10</sup> Walter Berns, *Making Patriots* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 31.

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Moreover, the transformed world that they envision does not require spiritual work; it requires the creation of the right political institutions animated by the right political ideology. This notion brings to mind T. S. Eliot's refrain in *Choruses from the Rock*:

They constantly try to escape  
From the darkness outside and within  
By dreaming of systems so perfect that  
no one will need to be good.

Eliot's insight is followed by the admonishing line:

But the man that is shall shadow  
The man that pretends to be.

There are many reasons for parting company with the pretentious advocates of American empire, but, first and foremost, one must object to their romantic dreaming of a world in which Jacobin or quasi-Jeffersonian notions of equality, liberty, and democracy are realized. In short, they are not moral realists. They envision a world in which individuals and governments will do all that is necessary to uphold natural rights without persons' needing to pay much attention to their own ethical life. They fail to take account of the depravity that is never absent from the human condition. They assume the possibility of a world without evil.

What is at issue is the meaning of greatness. According to one view, of which the Framers were representative, personal moral character is an essential attribute of a certain kind of greatness. Dictators may be great in the sense that they have attained great power. But power for its own

sake is not the proper measure of greatness. Plato's *Republic* makes this clear: Thrasymachus is not a philosopher; he is a philodoxer. Using power to promote the common good and lead men to virtue makes it consistent with true greatness. George Washington is a great man because he, unlike most rulers, did not lust for power as an end in itself and was willing to share it and use it for the common good. George III is said to have called Washington "the greatest man in the world" because he put down the Newburgh Conspiracy; he refused great power because he knew it would be destructive to republicanism in America.<sup>11</sup> He chose the modest path, a different kind of greatness, the greatness of Cicero and Cato and other men who risked their lives in efforts to save the republic from empire.

Greatness in this sense does not require that one live in a powerful regime that occupies center stage in world politics. In fact, such greatness is not the monopoly of any one nation, race, or epoch. Greatness is the product of conquering the self rather than nations, their armies, or nature.

Subduing totalitarian regimes does not in itself constitute greatness. Stalin not only helped to subdue Hitler, but, if John Lukacs is correct, Nazi Germany would not have been defeated without the contribution of the Soviet Union. If Hitler had won the war, that would not have made Nazi Germany a great nation. Neither Nazi Germany nor the So-

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<sup>11</sup> See Joseph Ellis, *His Excellency: George Washington* (New York: Knopf, 2004), 139.

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viet Union were great nations in any meaningful sense of greatness. They may have been colossal, but they were not great. Thrasymachus and Protagoras would have us believe that human success and power in themselves are the measure of greatness, but Plato and Aristotle knew better. Greatness is measured by conquering and knowing oneself. Buddha's *Dhammapada* captures the essence of greatness in the succinct statement that, "If one man conquer in battle a thousand times a thousand men, and if another conquers himself, he is the greatest of conquerors."

America's primary challenge of greatness in the twentieth century was not that of winning the world wars or the Cold War but of maintaining fidelity to the spirit of modest republicanism out of which she was born, this at a time when she was tempted by her economic and military strength to reach for empire and dominate the world. America's challenge in the post-Cold War era is not to subdue the world and spread her values. The challenge is rather to subdue the will to empire, a desire that, if gratified, will mean the end of American republican government.

Fortunately, there is growing intellectual opposition, much of it philosophically and historically grounded, to the imperial trend in American politics and culture. It is reinforcing doubts in the American public regarding the tendency to see the world as America's business and America as the model for

changing the world. Most generally, this intellectual opposition is exposing the romantic understanding of democracy and human nature and the nationalistic *hubris* that animate the desire to have America dominate the world.

Whatever may be new in what has been argued here, its moral and philosophical substance is old. The modest republic is inspired by thinkers as diverse in time and place as Aristotle, who defined and counseled moderation in his conception of both politics and personal life, and C. S. Lewis, who understood that pride is the undoing of individuals as well as nations.

The American Constitution, to reiterate, was not made for empire but for modest republicanism. In fact, the United States were born in opposition to empire. As Robert Nisbet has noted, "the American Constitution was designed for a people more interested in governing itself than in helping to govern the rest of the world."<sup>12</sup> To argue for American empire is to argue against the American constitutional heritage; it is to import a pedigree of thinking, politics, and government that is alien to and destructive of America's constitutional order.

Empire is also contrary to American interests. Empire means conquest, and conquest means tensions, violence, and war. International conflict becomes more likely with each step toward empire. It is not surpris-

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<sup>12</sup> Robert Nisbet, *The Present Age: Progress and Anarchy in Modern America* (Harper & Row, 1988), 1.

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ing that in the wake of late nineteenth and early twentieth century calls for global crusades for democracy the U.S. was engaged in war for nearly seventy-five continuous years. Empire breeds the war state, and the war state is ultimately incompatible with constitutional government.

Empire is destructive to the very self-restraint that makes republican government possible. It is inspired by the pride that animates C. S. Lewis's "man-moulders" in their efforts to remake human nature and the world. But it might be asked: Is it not the work of great men and women to mold the citizenry—and of great nations to mold the world? Are they not, like Plato's philosopher-kings, aware of universal forms of good and beauty that should shape the souls of malleable masses at home and abroad? These are not the aspirations of the advocates of republican virtue. Even the more subtle sound of imperialism grates on republican sensibilities. The world is not the plaything of Americans.

In view of the constant talk today of the virtue of greatness, who can possibly be against it? But greatness can mean radically different things. The greatness that sends Americans across the globe crusading for democracy is the Trojan horse of America's constitutional regime. The allure of a powerful state seduces many into believing that it has only altruistic motives. The sweet sound of spreading liberty, democracy, and equality is in reality the mask for the will to power.

The emergence of the American

constitutional order cannot be understood apart from its growing out of opposition to empire. The American republic brought to life a system of government with modest ends. A central part and purpose of the constitutional structure was decentralized power, something that is anathema to empire and its vortex of centralizing power.

Empire undermines the autonomy of sectional interests and local communities, putting it at loggerheads with the very core of the American political and social order. Those who argue for American empire push centralized power far beyond the scale of what was intended by the Framers and of what is prudent given American interests in the twenty-first century.

What, then, drives the quest for American empire? On the surface it is first and foremost the belief that American values are universal and appropriate to all historical and cultural circumstances. Given the outcome of the Cold War, the United States has it within its power to reshape the world in accordance with its values of democracy, equality, and freedom. But are these Jacobin-sounding principles universal, or even American? And do they not in their desire to remake human nature and the world merely mask a will to power?

The American Framers intended a modest republic that would allow individuals and communities to enjoy the fruits of liberty. For liberty to flourish it was necessary that power remain limited and decentralized.

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By contrast, the consolidation and centralization of power that comes with the movement toward American empire means the demise of

republican government and the local communities that are its foundation. Those who favor the promised land must oppose the crusader state.