

Enemies of The Roman Order

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One day decades ago, during the Vietnam War, I saw a reference to a book called *Enemies of the Roman Order: Treason, Unrest, and Alienation in the Empire*.¹ Excited, I took it out of the library: here, I thought, I would find information on how the vaunted Roman civilization had oppressed non-Roman nationalities and the Roman lower classes as well as historical perspective on the fight I felt myself to be in against the modern world's mightiest empire. As might be imagined, the book was a disappointment. As I remember, the preface defined its topic as those groups that would have been investigated by an "Un-Roman Activities Committee," if such had existed, and some browsing convinced me that the author identified fully with the imperial Roman, anti-subversive mentality. I have no idea if this was a fair judgment, since I quickly returned the book; and this long-ago failure of nerve shows that I hadn't yet learned the necessary lessons for living in a temporarily successful empire: how to read the reality under pro-empire images of benign world dominance; how much popular opinion may identify with destructive power—illustrated for me year later when audiences at the movie *Gladiator* cheered the Roman armies' mechanized slaughter of Germanic tribal fighters; and how to continue favoring popular struggle, self-determination, the hope of ultimate freedom, even disorder and anarchy (which we shouldn't idealize—most people desire order) in a period of momentary imperial stabilization, while maintaining patient, long-term, ironic hate for the "Roman order."

These reflections are prompted by the first year of Bush's so-called "war on terror"; its most negative effect has not been any specific political or military action but the way it has legitimized both the imperial mentality and the actual discussion of the U.S. as an empire playing (it is usually assumed) a benevolent role of world domination. Quite a few opinion makers have made this point in the last year. For example, in a fall 2001 article called "The Case for an American Empire," *Wall Street Journal* editorial features editor Max Boot claimed that "Afghanistan and other troubled lands today cry out for the sort of enlightened foreign administration once provided by self-confident Englishmen in jodhpurs and pith helmets." Journalist Robert D. Kaplan argues, "There's a positive side to empire. It's in some ways the most benign form of order." And in an essay subtitled "The Case for a Committed American Imperialism," Michael Ignatieff opposes "nation-building lite" (essentially, going into and out of a country like Afghanistan too quickly). Ignatieff says frankly that the U.S. Special Forces "are an imperial detachment, advancing American power and interests in Central Asia. Call it peacekeeping or nation-building, call it what you like—imperial policing is what is going on[...] In fact, America's entire war on terror is an exercise in imperialism," in which Ignatieff believes in "staying the course" (28, 30).² Boot and other writers draw explicit, positive comparisons to Roman and British imperial history.

More recently, criticisms of Bush's plans for "preemptive" war on Iraq have led his supporters to point proudly to past U.S. interventions like those in Haiti in 1915 (lasted until 1934) and the Dominican Republic in 1916 (until 1924) and 1965 (stopped the restoration of constitutionally elected President Juan Bosch). We are seeing a massive rehabilitation of a century and a half of U.S. imperialism.

Two qualifications should be made. First, there's more uneasiness and opposition to Bush's overall policy, especially on Iraq, than at a comparable period in the Vietnam War. Second, Bush had help from al Qaeda. The wide support for Bush's war in Afghanistan had a lot to do with the

¹ By Ramsay MacMullen. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1966.

² Boot and Kaplan quoted in Emily Eakin, "All Roads Lead to D.C.," *New York Times* March 31, 2002; Michael Ignatieff, "Nation-Building Lite," *New York Times Magazine* July 28, 2002: 26–31+.

nature of the September 11, 2001 attack, a clandestine strike against civilians that—as terrorism usually does—terrified people and built support for the government. As a friend of mine in England wrote, “I guess I believe that, whatever I think about imperialism, [...] I don’t want me or mine to be flown into some skyscraper by people who think they are going to paradise.” Hard to argue against that. In response, we must oppose the invasion of Afghanistan and the rest of the “war on terror” not because the U.S. (or any country) has no right to defend itself but because it should have been clear from the start that the U.S. would use legitimate self-defense as a way to win backing for goals of domination that already existed, but with less support, before September 11.

The new admiration for Rome should give any thoughtful person pause. Rome’s power was founded on incredible brutality and the destruction of entire peoples. Rome—an imperial power even while still a republic, as its admirers hope for the U.S.—gained domination of the known world in three long wars against the other major power of the day, Carthage (264–41, 218–201, and 149–46 BCE). The third, after Carthage was already eliminated as a real rival, was launched in response to Cato the Elder’s slogan “Carthago delenda est”—“Carthage must be obliterated.” Carthage never surrendered; the Romans conquered it house by house, sold the survivors into slavery, tore down the remaining buildings, and ploughed over the land. The Romans made war against the Franks, Germans, Britons, Jews, and others, enslaving their people, destroying their cultures and bleeding their economies. The Roman armies were the most disciplined the world had ever seen. In the end it did no good. Its power overextended, its economy exhausted, its culture and politics corrupted—for reasons endlessly debated by later historians—Rome declined and was ultimately conquered and sacked by the very peoples it had oppressed. This is the history—at least its first part, Rome’s ascendancy and brutal, devastating world power—that the “new Rome” thinkers are idealizing. The effects of this thinking can be seen in three of the areas that have been Bush’s main concerns, Palestine, Iraq, and Afghanistan itself.

Palestine

The most obscene use of September 11’s events to manipulate public opinion in favor of goals of domination that already existed before the attacks is in Israeli-U.S. policy toward Palestine. On the surface the Palestine issue may seem morally ambiguous: two nations fighting each other over the same land, each employing terror tactics—on the Israeli side, occupation of whole cities, assassinations of Palestinian leaders (and civilians), blockades and economic strangulation; on the Palestinian side, terror bombings against civilians. In terms of immediate tactics, yes, there’s some ambiguity. I believe attacks on civilians are both morally wrong and also counterproductive. I personally think a Palestinian policy of consistent nonviolent protests would win better results than the terror bombings, appealing to still-powerful Israeli ethical conceptions and removing the fear and desperation that build Israeli support for Sharon. (At the same time there’s a powerful logic to the terror bombings: when Israeli officials boast that occupying Palestinian cities is justified because no bombings have occurred for a month, there is almost no choice but to stage another bombing.)

But when one goes back to the beginning there is no ambiguity at all about the Palestinian claim to independence. Israel was founded on Palestinian land, against Palestinian resistance. From the end of the nineteenth century, when the Zionist movement began settling in Palestine,

through Israel's founding in 1948, the Zionist aim was to obtain land by settlement, purchase, intimidation, or seizure in order to create a state of and for Jews. The original aim was a 100 percent Jewish population; only later did Israelis compromise and accept an Arab minority. But the Jewish population of historic Palestine, tiny in the 1890s, was only 11 percent in 1922 and 31 percent in 1943.³ Continuous immigration was not enough to create a Jewish majority even in the three-fourths of Palestine that Israel at first controlled. In addition, during the 1948–49 war, large numbers of Arabs fled combat areas during the fighting and, when they tried to return, found their homes seized as “abandoned.” In other cases Israelis carried out massacres, notably in the village of Deir Yassin where they killed 254 men, women, and children the night of April 9/10, 1948. Naturally this encouraged Arabs elsewhere to flee. Israel lists all these as having resettled voluntarily. To this day Israeli agencies still buy up or condemn Palestinian land and evict the Palestinian inhabitants. After Israel seized the West Bank and Gaza Strip in the 1967 war, Israelis began settling there as well (defying UN resolutions treating these areas as occupied territory to be eventually returned) with the almost universally conceded aim of creating “facts on the ground” that would let Israel keep at least some of these areas in any eventual peace deal. There are now over 200,000 settlers in these areas, plus 175,000 more in East Jerusalem. The number has grown more than 70 percent since 1993.⁴

In sum, Israelis built their state on land seized from Palestinians. This means that the original Palestinian demand for a single “democratic secular state” in all of Palestine is entirely just, if not realizable. The willingness of most Palestinians to settle for a state in the West Bank and Gaza, with some negotiated agreement on the rights of displaced persons, is itself a painful compromise with Israeli aggression. But in any case, the justice of the Palestinian cause—i.e., their right to independence, as distinct from their strategy—is absolute, with no moral ambiguity at all.

But this clarity has been smeared over in the U.S. by moral equivocation stemming from September 11.

Sharon's record and policy line—brilliant in his own terms—ought to be clear to all. Sharon opposed the 1993 Oslo agreement when it was made and ever since. Representing the wing of Israeli politics that believes Israel should rightly own all of Palestine, he has, I would guess, a maximum and minimum strategy: as a maximum goal, to reoccupy the whole West Bank and expel enough Palestinians to assure control, gradually shifting the population balance through Israeli settlement; as a minimum goal, to postpone a settlement as long as possible, using the ever-growing Israeli settlements to ensure that Israel gets more territory—and Palestine is smaller and more atomized—if some agreement becomes unavoidable. If this policy appears irrational, on the grounds that more repression will inevitably provoke more resistance, it should be remembered that this is not necessarily true—resistance can indeed be crushed, at least for substantial historical periods—and in any case Sharon's goal is to prevent, not facilitate, any agreement short of an abject surrender.

Sharon's short-term tactics are brilliant as well: every time there has been a possible opening toward negotiations he has either waited for or provoked a Palestinian terror attack to block the

³ Maxime Rodinson, *Israel, A Colonial-Settler State?* Trans. David Thorstad. New York: Monad, 1973 [new ed., New York: Pathfinder, 2002]. 56. Another valuable source, Walid Khalidi, *From Haven to Conquest: Readings in Zionism and the Palestine Problem Until 1948*, is out of print but available in libraries.

⁴ Americans for Peace Now, “Fact Sheet: West Bank and Gaza Strip Settlements,” March 2001. www.peacenow.org/nia/briefs/Settlements0301.html Aug. 7, 2002. See also U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, “West Bank.” www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/we.html Aug. 7, 2002.

opening (with the Palestinians getting blamed) and reinforce his own occupation policy. On July 23, for example, Sharon bombed a Hamas residence in Gaza, killing a military leader of Hamas and fourteen other people, including nine children, just as the Tanzim militias, associated with Yasir Arafat's al Fatah, were negotiating with Hamas and other groups on an agreement to "end attacks on innocent, noncombatant men, women, and children" (*New York Times* July 28, 2002: 1:12). The result, of course, was to kill that agreement and guarantee Palestinian retaliation—which occurred with the July 31 bombing at Hebrew University that killed seven and provided, for Sharon, justification for new raids in the West Bank. From Sharon's viewpoint this development is probably relatively positive. The reported agreement would have increased pressure for negotiations, which Sharon opposes, and in addition Sharon is buying time for his policy, which he describes as "rooting out" the Palestinian Authority (*New York Times* Aug. 10, 2002: A2).

But despite what should be a clear record of U.S.-backed Israeli repression, support for Palestine is at its lowest level in years, with the Israeli peace movement in ruins and various polls showing that a majority of U.S. respondents consider the Palestinian Authority terrorists. (In Europe opinion is somewhat more pro-Palestinian.) Palestinian actions have certainly contributed to this situation; Israelis know they or their loved ones may be blown up by suicide bombers at any time, and Americans watching from a distance know it too. Nonetheless, when one views the whole period since September 11, it's clear that Sharon, with his tactical sharpness, brilliantly grasped that Palestinians could now be painted into al Qaeda's corner and that the U.S. policy of overthrowing the Afghan government to smash al Qaeda could be used to justify his own policy of smashing Palestinian self-government; there was an exact parallel in logic, and a persuasive parallel in terms of public opinion. And so events have largely turned out. Because of the numbness and moral blindness produced by the constant U.S. insistence that any and every aggression is justified by the "war against terror," every new atrocity seems both inevitable and somehow acceptable. For a power-blinded population in the U.S. and partly in Europe, U.S. world domination is both the goal and the means to the goal of an ever-elusive security. The acme of imperialist arrogance has come with the U.S.'s adoption of Sharon's line that Yasir Arafat must step down before negotiations can even begin. Aside from the possible rights and wrongs of such a demand, it expresses an imperial mentality that is more and more in fashion; few people (in the U.S.!) question that the U.S. has the *right* to decide what governments are acceptable for other nations.

Iraq

As I write, the guessing game is not about whether the U.S. will invade Iraq, but about how and when. It is clear that this will be a much bigger operation than in Afghanistan, against a larger, better-trained army. More soldiers on both sides, and many more civilians, will be killed. Yet, while everyone is aware of what is going to happen, everyone is numb with inevitability and moral confusion. In a variant of Hitler's "Big Lie" technique—repeat a lie often enough and everyone will believe it—Bush has not bothered to present serious evidence that Iraq's regime supports al Qaeda, etc., or that it is planning to attack any other country. He just repeats vague reports of al Qaeda contacts and uses the future possibility of an attack to repeat that Iraq must be stopped now. Since obtaining a House-Senate resolution authorizing war (October), Bush's end-game gambit has been to demand UN inspections under ever more severe conditions, using

either Iraq's refusal or any violation as his excuse to move. In the process of this Big Lie operation several other things become clear.

One is what the "war on terror" means. Despite some halfhearted assertions by Bush's hired liars, there is no evidence that Iraq's government had any major contacts with al Qaeda or is sponsoring other terrorist groups, but Bush has defined Iraq's "development of weapons of mass destruction" as terrorism. Since Iraq has some chemical and no nuclear weapons but Pakistan and India—not to mention Israel—have nuclear weapons, Bush means: development of such weapons by a regime the U.S. opposes is terrorism. Iraq's government is, of course, a brutal military dictatorship. Plus or minus an adjective, so are those of No. 1 anti-terror ally Pakistan, No. 1 and 2 Mideast allies Egypt and Saudi Arabia, and NATO ally and potential anti-Iraq launching-pad Turkey—a parliamentary regime with a constitutional military veto. In fact, Iraq itself got arms, satellite intelligence, and battlefield planning aid from the U.S. in its war with Iran (1980–88), which the U.S. then saw as the major threat to its power in the Middle East. The aid went on while Iraq was using chemical weapons in battle (*New York Times* Aug. 18, 2002: A1). So for Bush to complain about Iraq's weaponry is utter hypocrisy. In sum, everything the U.S. accuses Iraq of is also true of its allies, including, at one time, Iraq. For the U.S. to define Iraq as terrorist means that it now claims the right to overthrow any government it opposes.

Bush's threats also make clear who "the U.S." is. Invading Iraq is not generally popular, as invading Afghanistan was. For example, a *New York Times* report from Scottsdale, Arizona—Bush country—found that "Democrats and political independents interviewed were nearly unanimous in their opposition to an invasion, and most Republicans felt the same way" (Aug. 3, 2002: A9). Bush is listening to his own advisers and some conservative elites and ignoring public unease. Congress and the press have mostly been backed him up, repeating his cover story that he seeks Iraq's "disarmament" and debating how and when, not whether. ("The question for me is, Do we have enough time to do this right?" says Democratic Sen. Joseph R. Biden Jr. of Delaware—*Times* Aug. 3 2002: A8). But, on the other hand, the mass of the people, plus what remains of the antiwar movement, is too demoralized and intimidated to organize protests (and, to be honest, there is no real interest in protests now). Even the anarchist discussion sites I follow are all but silent on Iraq, as on Palestine.

It's too soon to know just how Bush's end-game will play. In the U.S. most Democrats as well as Republicans are now backing him. There is more opposition in Europe, where German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder flatly opposes war and France and Russia are trying to make Bush agree to obtain UN authorization for an attack. My guess is that these critics will agree to some compromise that will leave his hands free. On the street, over 300,000 people protested in London in September and protests are building elsewhere. These will not slow Bush at all but they are important for building a movement against the war once it begins.

A third point has to do with the motivations behind U.S. imperial policy. During the first Iraq war in 1991, many leftists charged that the war was really for control of oil. At the time, I felt this argument oversimplified the way imperialism works. In 1990, Iraq produced about 9 percent of OPEC's oil, Kuwait about 5 percent (including half the oil produced in a Saudi-Kuwaiti neutral zone), and Saudi Arabia about 28 percent. OPEC itself produced 38 percent of the world's oil. So control of Kuwait would have given Iraq 14 percent of OPEC's oil and 5.3 percent of world production, a significant amount, but not enough to change oil power relations significantly. I believed the main U.S. motive was overall power, safeguarding the U.S. position as the major imperial force in the Middle East, especially in view of the collapse of the Soviet Union and

resulting uncertainty about the overall world power balance. In 2002, it should be even clearer that control of oil supplies is a minor issue. Iraq's share of OPEC production is now a little lower, 8 percent; Saudi Arabia's a little higher, 29 percent; and OPEC's share of world production is around 42 percent, so Iraq's production is roughly 3 percent of the world total.⁵ Clearly, a war against Iraq would not be mainly motivated by concerns about oil. (However, some planners worry that the war itself could disrupt supplies; a *New York Times* report August 4 on potential Russian sources is aimed at reassuring them.) In general, most of the time imperialism doesn't work by simply intervening to control natural resources or markets. It works by constantly reinforcing a unified mesh of power relations—military, economic, cultural, etc.—covering as much of the world as possible, and intervening against those who escape or disturb the mesh in any way, like a spider repairing damage in any corner of its web. If, as now seems likely, Bush pulls the U.S. into war against Iraq, it will be to increase overall U.S. power, not to control Iraqi oil.

I myself hope for a U.S. defeat in Iraq. I am not pro-Iraq except in the senses that Iraq, regardless of its regime, has the right to national independence and that an eventual revolutionary movement that matures and overthrows the dictatorship from within will be far preferable to any U.S.-imposed and U.S.-controlled "regime change." But I am against U.S. domination. If they attack, I would like to see Bush and the U.S. military get a bloody nose, and if possible lose some teeth. But while I hope for major resistance, I think there's a good chance Iraq will be defeated fairly quickly. The regime is an unpopular dictatorship. Of course, people may defend their country even while hating the government, but short-term resistance depends on the armed forces. Since gaining a U.S.-aided victory against Iran in 1988 and being overwhelmed by U.S. air power and flanking attacks in Kuwait in 1991, the army has done little except push around poor people, round up dissidents, and rake off "taxes" on smuggled goods. Morale is probably quite low. U.S. firepower—remote-controlled, computer-guided, overwhelmingly destructive—is itself a terror weapon of first magnitude. So resistance may crumble soon. But the costs will come later, as the U.S. tries to select a government it can control, build up a group within the Iraqi military that will do its bidding, and create institutions that look democratic but don't allow anti-U.S. politics.

As a teacher, I also think about my present and former students in the U.S. military—at least three in recent graduating classes, all in the Marines. Naturally, if they are sent to Iraq (or any other war zone) I hope for them to come back safely. But I also think of what General de Gaulle, head of the French Resistance in World War II, said about German soldiers: "If the Germans did not want to die at our hands, they had only to stay at home."⁶ But of course a soldier has no choice about whether to stay home; if any of these men and women come to harm, it is President Bush who will have murdered them.

⁵ Sources: U.S. Energy Information Administration, Department of Energy, "OPEC Member Countries' Crude Oil Production, 1973–92," "OPEC Crude Oil Production, Past 10 Years," "World Crude Oil Production, 1960–2000"; U.S. Office of Transportation Technologies, Department of Energy, "OPEC and OPEC+ Resource Shares," Jan. 31, 2000. <ftp://ftp.eia.doe.gov/pub/energy/overview/monthly.energy/historic.mer/tab10-1a.txt>, www.eia.doe.gov/emeu/ipsr/t12.txt, www.cts.ornl.gov/data/tedb21/Spreadsheets/Table1_02.xls, www.ott.doe.gov/facts/archives/fotw114.shtml. Accessed Aug. 2–5, 2002.

⁶ Quoted in Yvan Craipeau, *Contre vents et marées [Against Wind and Tide]*. Paris: Éditions Savelli, 1977. 121.

Afghanistan

Afghanistan is supposed to showcase the success of Bush's "war on terror." The U.S. replaced an unfriendly, repressive government with a pro-U.S. regime, drove al Qaeda underground, and restored civil and women's rights, all at a cost of fewer than 100 U.S., and some thousands of Afghan lives. It is true that the U.S. has bombed some wedding parties, factions opposed by local leaders, etc., but by and large there hasn't been absolutely wanton destruction. If one could ignore the principle that imperialism is always wrong these would be positive achievements.

But one can't ignore the principle. As an analogy, let's consider European-American imperialism in the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries. Britain's conquest of India, the U.S. conquest of native Americans, the slave trade and then Europe's division of Africa in the nineteenth century meant the destruction of viable societies, imposition of foreign rule, and killing and enslavement of millions. But these conquests also brought some advantages of communication, modernization, etc. Apologists for imperialism excel in the kind of calculus that sums up gains and losses and pronounces imperialism at best beneficial, at worst mixed in its effects. In fact, this kind of balance-sheet thinking always yields ambiguous results. Our approach should be different.

I am a utopian. I insist that even in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries there were, or should have been, better ways to bring (let's say) European communications and education to India than to colonize the subcontinent. I don't accept the idea that the only way to gain such benefits was through then-existing systems of exploitation, or the Marxist idea that because classless communism was impossible in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, progress could come only at the cost of conquest. Even then, social visionaries pointed to possible alternatives and people of conscience injected morality into economic life—for example Thomas Clarkson (1760–1846), who as a minister-in-training delivered his Cambridge Latin oration on the slave trade and then spent his whole life campaigning against slavery. Clarkson changed the political economy of slavery by adding wide-spread moral condemnation to the costs slave-traders bore, and helped bring slavery in England to an earlier end than might otherwise have happened. So today—and with a lot more immediate practicality—I would argue that U.S. conquest was not the only way to stop Taliban repression or free Afghan women. Within five years, or ten, the unstable Taliban would have crumbled. Better a thousand times if this had happened because of Afghan opposition—and better yet if it were popular, organized, urban, and civilian rather than guerrilla opposition, creating an Afghanistan that was both free and independent, unlike Afghanistan today.

Now to the more concrete aspects, which may back up my use of the loaded terms "imperialism" and "independent." Afghanistan today is a U.S. puppet state, in which, however, the state's and the U.S.'s power are both extremely limited. Hamid Karzai, the current leader, a previously little-known politician with no following of his own, was picked as interim president by the U.S., with some consultation with Afghans and its European allies, at a conference in Germany. His selection was later OK'd by a "loya jirga" (an assembly of regional delegates) that met for ten days in June, but the assembly had few real powers and Karzai and his U.S. advisers made all decisions about Karzai's cabinet and other matters behind the scenes. In July, after two vice presidents in Karzai's government were assassinated, Karzai replaced his Afghan security guards with a U.S. Special Forces squad, an indication of how little support he has (New York Times July 29, 2002: A3). Karzai's qualifications include his fluency in English and readiness to express liberal social views—important in winning support in Washington and European capitals—and his Pashtun

ethnicity, which slightly disguises the fact that ethnic Tadjhiks from northern Afghanistan, who made up the anti-Taliban “Northern Alliance,” run the government and staff all its departments, and that the government still has little support among the southern Pashtun people who comprise about half Afghanistan’s population.

This is not the only division mucking up U.S. plans to build a stable, pro-U.S., semi-democratic dependent state in Afghanistan. The Afghan government—and therefore the U.S.—has very little presence outside the capital. U.S. troops are unopposed, but their firepower is not governmental power. Multiple ethnic divisions; local “warlords”—the contemptuous U.S. name for regional-local leaders in a society still based mainly on tribal-ethnic organization; continuing U.S. air raids against unarmed civilians; and the evident fact that ex-Taliban (including Afghanistan’s former president) and al Qaeda fighters are being sheltered somewhere in the country are factors creating a pull between what Michael Ignatieff, quoted earlier, calls “nation-building lite” and “heavy” imperial policing. Ignatieff advocates heavy involvement for a fairly modest goal: “appoint the least-bad warlords as civilian governors to keep a rough-and-ready peace and collect some taxes. This sort of ordered anarchy, among loosely controlled regional fiefs, would provide ordinary Afghans with basic security. This may be all that is possible, and it may be all that American interests require” (30). But Ignatieff understands that even this may not work, so there is a pull toward deeper and deeper involvement.

In the light of history, some thoughts are possible about this murky situation. First, U.S. involvement in the inner workings of the new government is probably much greater than the news media are making clear. Second, Karzai’s hold on power and life are now only as secure as his U.S. bodyguards wish. As Afghan history under the Soviet occupation from 1978 to 1992 suggests, puppet rulers have short lives, often shortened by their own sponsors.⁷ U.S. methods are to build up factions in a country’s military than can take over if and when necessary. If Karzai can’t produce a stable, moderately repressive government, his own term in office may be brief. Finally, over time deepening U.S. involvement, manipulation of the government, continuing military and police operations, etc., are likely to refocus public opinion there—now pro-U.S. in the capital at least—against the U.S. Though we can’t know for sure, historic precedents suggest that this shift will occur and that it will be slow and lasting. If and when an anti-U.S. opposition emerges, we also cannot know if it will be democratic or authoritarian, Islamic or secular, or a mix of these. I think anti-authoritarians should support such an opposition overall, while specifically supporting democratic, anti-authoritarian, and secular groups within it.

A New Rome?

Right now we seem to be living through a temporary triumph of the U.S. empire, a moment when U.S. political domination, uncontrolled market capitalism, acquisitive and competitive values—and, even more, belief in the rightness of all these—are in the saddle everywhere. It is true the U.S. is in danger of becoming seriously overextended. Not only are Bush & Co. about to launch a major war in Iraq when Afghanistan is still not secure; they are also involved in a small-scale

⁷ The USSR successively installed, then removed and murdered, presidents Nur Mohamed Taraki (1978–79), Hafizullah Amin (1979), and Babrak Kamal (1979–86); the last, Najibullah (1986–92), was hanged by the Taliban in 1996. “Chronological History of Afghanistan, Part IV (1978–Present).” Afghanistan Online. www.afghan-web.com/history/chron/index4.html. August 3, 2002.

counterinsurgency in the Philippines and are renewing military aid to Indonesia, and Congress has just approved using U.S.-supplied weapons against rebels in Colombia, a step toward direct involvement. (Previously, the weapons were supposed to be used only in anti-drug actions.) Down the road, costs in U.S. bodies as well as economic disruption to a weakened economy will rise. Despite siren calls for a new empire, the security empire seems to offer is an illusion; imperial Rome's history, in fact, was a five hundred year record of border warfare and corruption and social oppression at home. Yet, I believe there's a long way to go before mass opposition to all this (as in the Vietnam era) will grow.

How do we respond to this situation? In somewhat similar circumstances in 1940, Leon Trotsky voiced some useful, though limited, thoughts. Trotsky was debating whether the USSR was a new form of exploiting society, as some factional opponents thought, or a temporary regression on the road to socialism, as he believed. (These were the only alternatives he considered.) If his opponents were right, Trotsky wrote, "nothing else would remain except only to recognize that the socialist program, based on the internal contradictions of capitalist society, ended as a Utopia. It is evident that a new 'minimum' program would be required—for the defense of the interests of the slaves of the totalitarian bureaucratic society."⁸ By "minimum" program Trotsky means the fight for workers' living standards, democratic rights, etc., in a period when revolution is not at hand, and this is the part of his formula that I think has some value.⁹ On the other hand, when Trotsky says a new exploiting society would make the socialist program "a Utopia," he means the idea of a free society would have to be abandoned, and this I think was wrong.

In a period of temporary imperial triumph, it is possible and necessary to fight against the empire's consolidation and for the independence of its constituent peoples, as well as for social betterment and greater democracy in general. In addition to struggles for better living standards, workers' rights, better health care, defense of democratic rights in the U.S., against globalization and environmental destruction, etc., all the specific acts of resistance implied above—for Palestinian independence, against U.S. war plans for Iraq, against U.S. control of Afghanistan—are also blows against the empire's stabilization.

It is time to end the paralysis referred to earlier. This fall there should be teach-ins on every campus, local demonstrations, and plans for a national mobilization to say NO to invading Iraq. The fledgling campus movements of support for Palestine need to expand, countering the anti-Palestinian slant of the mass media. Activists should begin to build opposition now to deeper U.S. involvement in Colombia.

Beyond these points, there is a need to think about some points related to the particular form imperialism is now taking—a struggle by Western secular states against an opposition in part inspired by Islam. My impression is that some anti-imperialists are uncomfortable dealing with the issue of Islam and tend to focus instead on more "directly political" issues. Yet some major portion of opposition to U.S. domination is now based partly on religious values that we need

⁸ "The USSR in War." *In Defense of Marxism*. New York: Pathfinder, 1973. 9.

⁹ The "minimum" program also has a technical, historical meaning. In the pre-World War I socialist movement, which assumed that capitalism would have to develop fully before socialism would be possible, the "minimum program" referred to those demands that could be achieved without a revolution; the "maximum program"—socialism—was assumed to be for the future. Trotsky thought in general that the world was ready for revolution and tried to work out what he called a "transitional program" of demands that would lead from specific struggles to the struggle for power. In his 1940 discussion, he was saying that his opponents' view of Russia would mean revolution was impossible for the foreseeable future and one would have to go back to the two-tiered "minimum" and "maximum" programs.

to understand. Bush has grasped the simple point that Islam is “a religion of peace.” He never has and never will grasp that it is not for the U.S., or non-Muslims, to say what Islam is. We—opponents of military, political, economic, and cultural domination—have to respect religious beliefs and practices in general, and those of Islam in particular. This has to mean more than respecting “the right to be wrong.” We need to realize that people seek in religion a spiritual aspect to existence that is missing in much of contemporary society and that the left typically (and arrogantly) dismisses or belittles, and that this desire for a more spiritual existence is behind some of the anti-Western sentiment that appeals to some Muslims. (It is also behind some of the appeal of Islam in the United States, as well as the revival of African religious practices by some African Americans, not to mention people’s use of other religions, Protestant and Roman Catholic, to order their lives.) In other words, we need to go beyond viewing Islam as merely an ideological mask for anti-Western resistance—and well beyond despising it as “backward” or “medieval”—and understand that a sizable portion of the world’s people feel the need for a spiritual form for existence that secular philosophies don’t easily supply.

In my opinion, we need also to think twice about Islam’s attitude toward women (or attitudes—there is no single Muslim position), partly because many liberals used this issue as a bridge to cross over to supporting Bush’s attack on Afghanistan, but also because the issue is important in itself. The issue has two sides. So far as men use Muslim teachings (i.e., some versions of them) to control women, we should be opposed. But Muslim women themselves very often embrace ideals of modesty in dress and behavior that they see as an alternative to Western sexual wantonness; or they simply live within the accepted customs of their cultures while pursuing business, educational, and other careers; or a mixture of these. I have seen these attitudes often among my students. Leftists should, at the least, understand this behavior as a possible option in life and not condescend to these women by assuming that they are accepting oppression or practicing self-oppression.

Trotsky’s other comment, that if Russia were a new exploiting society then the socialist program would be “a Utopia,” deserves thought as well. As a classical Marxist Trotsky assumed capitalism had reached (and in fact passed) its highest possible level of development, and that only this fact made socialism possible; therefore, if a new kind of exploiting society were possible, with its own way of developing the “productive forces,” socialism would be “a Utopia,” that is, an empty dream until sometime far in the future. Although, as a Marxist for many years, I once believed this, I now think it is altogether wrong. First, capitalism obviously had not reached its highest possible development in 1940 (for example, most readers of Wide Web, an enormous technological advance over 1940). Nor has it done so now. I now think capitalism can continue to “develop the productive forces”—as well as destroy them—fairly indefinitely if it is not overthrown. Further, I now think Trotsky and other Marxists were wrong in their more basic assumption that the class struggle under capitalism objectively leads in the direction of socialism (this is what Trotsky primarily meant by “the internal contradictions of capitalist society”). I think, rather, that the class struggle can lead as easily to efforts to assimilate into the middle class or to self-conscious compromises in which workers limit themselves to demanding what the system can grant. (Actually, “the class struggle” is itself an abstraction. It refers both to specific workers’ struggles, seen by Marxists as “objective” parts of a presumed overall struggle by all workers, and to the idea that this larger struggle should be for socialism. As such, the idea that “the class struggle” leads “toward socialism” is either questionable or tautological.) All this

means there is no automatic dynamic leading even toward (let alone to) socialism and no point beyond which capitalism cannot develop or must decay.

But this in turn means Utopia is not just an empty dream until some assumed point of crisis. Utopia is the dreams by which people shape their ideals and in turn their goals in the midst of, and grope their way out of, oppression. Utopia is part of reality and changes reality by influencing what people work for and bequeath to their children to keep on working for—as did the anti-slavery movement mentioned earlier. And this is true both of secular thinkers' utopias (which ought to be more spiritual) and of spiritual thinkers' utopias. So it must not be true that in a moment of temporary imperial triumph we de-emphasize final goals by dismissing them as “a Utopia.” Part of our resistance to empire should be to reemphasize, and stress more, our utopian aims—a world without borders or oppression, with respect for a multiplicity of cultures and religions, attitudes to nationality and sexuality, etc., and with cooperation as the basis of social life (in other words, the actual social practice most of the time). These utopian possibilities are part of our opposition to empire, in fact the reason for it—why else would one oppose a program (Bush's) that may bring some political and social freedoms at the price of lost cultural independence and U.S. world dominion, except that one believes something better is possible? And our Utopia is, additionally, our way of competing with the Islamicists' and nationalists' utopias, while accepting what is best in them.

Finally, we need some perspectives about time. I believe we are living in a moment of triumph for the U.S. empire, but that the triumph will be relatively short-term. I stress that I don't know what “relatively short-term” means. The Roman empire lasted roughly 500 years, the British about 250. I don't think the U.S. empire (counting from the end of World War II) will survive anywhere near as long but I don't know. So time is on our side, or at least I think so.

Here some concluding words may be appropriate, written by George Orwell in his essay “Looking Back on the Spanish War” (1943).¹⁰ In his summation, Orwell comes back to the face of an Italian militiaman he met on his first day in Spain, “probably a Trotskyist or an Anarchist,” and comments,

The question is very simple. Shall people like that Italian soldier be allowed to live the decent, fully human life which is now technically feasible, or shan't they? Shall the common man be pushed back into the mud, or shall he not? I myself believe, perhaps on insufficient grounds, that the common man will win his fight sooner or later, but I want it to be sooner and not later—sometime within the next hundred years, say, and not sometime within the next ten thousand years. (208–9)

Reading this as a youth I thought Orwell was too patient. Today nearly sixty of his hundred years have passed and I would be quite happy to know that victory would come in the next forty. But we can't know; we can only continue to believe in resistance and Utopia and remain enemies of the Roman order.

¹⁰ In George Orwell, *A Collection of Essays*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982. 188–210.

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Enemies of The Roman Order
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