

## THE MIRAGE OF EMPIRE VERSUS THE PROMISE OF HEGEMONY

No one can doubt that the United States is currently the leading power in the world, and few at least in America would dispute that it needs to exercise world leadership in some fashion. The great debate is over what kind of leadership this should be and how it should be exercised. This essay offers only one idea, drawn primarily from the history of international politics: the United States has a choice between two modes of political leadership that, though they resemble each other and are often identified or considered interchangeable, nonetheless fundamentally differ in nature, practice, and effects. These are empire and hegemony. For purposes of world order and peace, the lure of empire, specious and inviting, is a mirage; the path of hegemony is genuinely possible and arguably necessary. The two, moreover, are not readily combined or compatible, but lead in contradictory directions. The current American pursuit of empire is undermining the chances for a useful, benign American hegemony, and if carried much further will end up promoting the very Hobbesian disorder it was supposed to prevent or overcome, one avoidable under a sane American hegemony.

To support these assertions with historically-based arguments would require at least three things:

- (1) Establishing a clear conceptual distinction between empire and hegemony, terms often conflated and used as synonyms, and showing that the distinction is useful for analysis.
- (2) Showing that this distinction is not merely useful for purposes of definition of terms, but that it represents a genuine choice or set of alternatives in history, and that the choice between policies of empire and policies of hegemony has made an important difference in historical outcomes.
- (3) Showing historically why empire does not work within an international system of the kind first developed in Western Europe and now prevailing throughout the world, even though it can work outside that system and has done so in the past, while hegemony can work within an international system such as the current one, sometimes works well, and often is required for any such international system to function tolerably and to endure.

A serious exposition of these three points, amounting as they do to a theory of international politics and an interpretation of five centuries of world international history in a nutshell, obviously is impossible in a short essay. All that can be done is to assert and at some points illustrate the main lines of argument. The whole case, however, is likely to be dismissed at the outset by the advocates of American empire as something perhaps interesting to historians and antiquaries, but irrelevant in today's world because that was then and this is now. The world is different since 9/11; the current enemies and threats to the United States and the so-called free world in the form of international terrorist organizations and movements, hostile ideologies, rogue regimes, and proliferating weapons of mass destruction exist everywhere and must be fought everywhere and nowhere in particular, but always and necessarily proactively and preventively. Under these circumstances, the old international system simply gets in the way and must be discarded or replaced with something better. Furthermore, American power and supremacy today is so much greater than any other power's has ever been; the ability of the United States to project that power globally with great speed and devastating effect is so unprecedented, and America's economic global reach and the soft power it has through the influence of its material culture and its attractive political and social institutions and values is so effective in penetrating other countries and societies, that historical lessons and strictures drawn from the past do not apply.<sup>1</sup>

My response to this is a further, still stronger assertion: the current American bid for empire as a recipe for world order and peace not only will fail and prove counterproductive ultimately, at some time in the future, but at present, in early 2003, is already failing. This is not a prediction but an observation, based not on specialized historical research but on the kind of general historical knowledge that educated lay persons can be expected to command and understand. The only real question is how far the current administration will continue to push this venture, doubling and redoubling its bets and refusing either to fold on a bad hand or cash in its chips while it is still ahead, and how much damage will be done before its failure is acknowledged and the venture abandoned.

For reasons of space, the argument in support of this claim must be bare-boned, apodictic, and apparently dogmatic. Clauses like "It seems to me" or "In my opinion" should be taken as read in much of what follows.

Both empire and hegemony are slippery terms, often defined in misleading or vague, excessively broad ways so that the difference between them becomes blurred or obliterated. Any sound definition of empire must include as one central element the exercise of political control by one organized community over another organized community different from and separate from it, giving the imperial power final decision-making power over essential political decisions affecting the community under its rule. Needless to say, many things contribute to the acquisition and exercise of that kind of imperial authority—military and economic power, scientific and technological prowess, culture, religion, ideology, ethnicity, and so on—but empire remains essentially the