CHAPTER 3

pax americana, pax humana

Sharon Welch

Who are we as Americans? What is our role now on the world stage? What are the best means of supporting the “ideals of liberty, self-determination, and equality in the rule of law”? In two speeches, both delivered in 2009 a few days apart, President Barack Obama announced a new foreign policy that signals the possibility of a momentous shift in US thinking about the nature of power, the limits of force, and the complexity of building peace and preventing conflict (Obama 2009a and 2009b). His remarks are part of a widespread and substantive debate among political theorists and political leaders about the foundations of international order itself, and the legitimate and essential role of the United States in fostering international peace and stability.

Robert Kagan, senior associate at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Jean Bethke Elshtain, professor of social and political ethics, and Niall Ferguson, professor of history, all urge the United States to accept responsibility as the guarantors of European and American security, international order, and freedom (Kagan 2003; Elshtain 2003, 6–7, 169–170; Ferguson 2003, 367–370). Jonathan Schell, noted journalist, and Zbigniew Brzezinski, national security advisor under President Carter, propose another path, asking us to be “liberal internationalists,” applying “cooperative power” to the “international sphere” (Schell 2003, 265; Brzezinski 2004, vii, 4, 18, 135–138, 217–218). Like William Schulz, former executive director of Amnesty International USA, they encourage the United States to shape, with
other nations, a new “international society,” responsive to the “common enemy of terrorism,” and resolutely committed to human rights and global justice (Schulz 2003, 211, 152).

Which path will we follow? We may try to become the beneficent guardians of “peace, prosperity and liberty” envisioned in the 2002 National Security Strategy of the Bush administration, preferring alliances but willing to act alone (Bush 2002). Or, we may become the “multilateralists” envisioned by President Barack Obama and the political theorist Joseph Nye Jr., as skilled in the exercise of persuasive cultural and political power as we are judicious in the use of economic and military might (Nye 2003; Obama 2009b).

We live in a time rife with debates about the best use of our national power, debates that hinge on understandings of the very nature of national and international power, and on interpretations of colonial history. William Schulz, for example, warns against imperialism and asks that we remember that moralistic domination breeds “resentment, resistance, and rebellion” (Schulz 2003, 61). Niall Ferguson takes quite a different lesson from the undeniable brutality yet seemingly irreplaceable achievements of the British Empire and asks the United States to resolutely accept the challenges of establishing and maintaining a Pax Americana (Ferguson 2003, xii, 367–370).

Many people within the United States acknowledge and embrace the thrill of Empire—the intoxication of mastery, the security of being met with deference if not respect, the challenge of assuming the mantle of destiny, of shaping the world in our image. The National Security Strategy of the United States of America reflects these goals. In its preface, President Bush states, “The United States enjoys a position of unparalleled military strength and great economic and political influence.” The document defends “a distinctly American internationalism” in which the United States will retain military supremacy and will use its influence to spread “freedom, democracy and free enterprise.” (Bush 2002) Those who would be the bearers of Empire most often see themselves as the harbingers of security and peace. From the order of the Pax Romana, through the “civilizing” global reach of the British Empire, to the freedom, democracy, and prosperity promised by imperial America, the rhythms of power, of truth, of unassailable military might, of absolute security swirl, surround, and overwhelm.

There is, however, a different rhythm in the widespread dissatisfaction with the US military actions in Iraq and Afghanistan. There are voices throughout the world calling for other ways of maintaining order and security, other means of bringing tyrants to justice, other forms