

Rule Columbia!

by Daniel McCarthy

“*The Empire is peace.*”

—Napoleon III

The Imperial Tense: Prospects and Problems of American Empire

edited by Andrew J. Bacevich

Chicago: Ivan R. Dee;

272 pp., \$16.95

Imperial America: The Bush Assault on the World Order

by John Newhouse

New York: Alfred A. Knopf;

196 pp., \$23.00



If the publishing industry has played any part in the supposed recent economic revival, it can, perhaps, thank George W. Bush. The President's foreign policy has made it possible to sell thousands of books with the words *empire* or *imperial* in the title. Indeed, it sometimes seems as if there are a dozen such books published each month. It is hard to keep count.

Of all these books, the best might still be one of the first: Andrew J. Bacevich's *American Empire* from 2002, which has just been reissued in paperback. Bacevich's thesis is that U.S. foreign policy has had consistent goals throughout the past half-century, no matter which party was in power or what ideological fads gripped the country. The overriding goal is the pursuit of “openness,” meaning something like the free movement of goods (above all), people, and (maybe) ideas across national borders—all to the benefit of American business and political interests, of course. U.S. foreign policy, according to Bacevich, has been defined by domestic needs—chiefly, the need for

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markets.

For his analysis, Bacevich drew upon the work of left-wing but non-Marxist historians Charles Beard (*An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution*) and William Appleman Williams. Bacevich himself, however, is not a man of the left, and his conclusion to *American Empire* would come as cold comfort to Beard or Williams if either were alive to read it, since Bacevich argues that—however much he might dislike what the republic has become—it is much too late to turn back the clock. Empire is here to stay. Bacevich might just as well have quoted Pericles at the end of his book: “Your empire now is like a tyranny: it may have been wrong to take it; it is certainly dangerous to let it go.” Whatever the right or wrong of it, Americans must now accept their empire and learn to govern it well.

The Imperial Tense: Prospects and Problems of American Empire, edited by Bacevich, picks up where *American Empire* leaves off. The book is Bacevich's attempt to clear away the jargon of international-studies departments and the claptrap of political speech to present the educated layman with a frank and plainspoken account of the American imperium as seen by four distinct schools of thought. Bacevich has had enough of archaic talk about “isolationism” and “realism,” and he proposes, instead, a more up-to-date taxonomy: The four camps he outlines in his introductory essay are those who embrace empire eagerly; those who do so more reluctantly; those who reject empire altogether; and those who cannot admit that empire even exists. Bacevich is one of the reluctant imperialists.

Most of the contributors to *The Imperial Tense* are university professors or journalists. Ideologically, they run the gamut of respectable opinion, from neoconservative to moderate liberal to far left. Absent, for the most part, is anyone from the explicitly anti-imperial right, with the notable exception of James Kurth, who provides the collection's last and best essay. The lack of antiwar conservative contributors is curious. Bacevich includes contributors from the *World Socialist Web Site* and from *National Review Online*, so why not Justin Raimondo or another *Antiwar.com* contributor? Why not someone from a paleoconservative print magazine? The usual excuse, that paleos are too marginal, will not work here. If Bacevich wants to present the most serious and plainspoken views on the American Empire, there is no shortage of suitable commentary on the unfashionable right.

The material that has made it into the

book is of variable quality, some of it as good as *American Empire* itself, and some of it, sad to say, of value only as a kind of pathological case study. The essays from Victor Davis Hanson and John Milbank especially stand out as examples of the latter. Both men are undeniably insightful in their academic fields—Hanson as a classicist; Milbank as a theologian. Hanson the wartime polemicist, however, demonstrates what a terrible thing it is to waste a mind, and his contribution here—the sole essay denying that America has become an empire of some kind—illuminates nothing. Milbank is a greater loss: His piece is the only one that tries to provide, in part, a Christian interpretation of the American Empire in the age of terror. At least Milbank is thought-provoking, though shrill.

Essays by David Rieff, Deepak Lal, and Charles Krauthammer make up the “eager imperialist” contingent. For Rieff, a liberal, American power means putting a stop to ethnic cleansing in Bosnia (as long as it is not the Serbs who are getting killed). Lal, an economist at UCLA, is a *homo economicus* conservative: For him, empire is a public-goods argument. Just as government is needed to provide order within states, global government is necessary for international order. This will lower transaction costs, facilitate “the free flow of goods, capital and people,” and keep the peace among states. Lal seems not to notice that, in order to accomplish such peacekeeping, the imperial power has to resort to *war*. The reader is left with the impression that war is not war so long as it is waged by the United States. So much for plain-spokenness.

Krauthammer makes the same argument in slightly different terms, claiming that American hegemony can and should be a force for the greater global good. Conveniently, what is best for the world is also best for America, at least as Krauthammer sees it. Unlike Lal, he is admirably candid, ending his piece with a play on Benjamin Franklin: “History has given you an empire, if you will keep it.” Clearly, Krauthammer is enjoying himself.

Victor Davis Hanson is the sole example from the America-is-not-an-empire school. That Bacevich did not include any others of this perspective suggests his own prejudices against those who live with their heads in the sand (of Iraq, maybe?). The anti-imperialist contingent, on

the other hand, is well represented. In addition to Milbank, David North of the *World Socialist Web Site*, Gabriel Ash of *YellowTimes.org*, and agrarian writer Wendell Berry all present unflinching condemnations of the American Empire. Ash argues that the United States has been imperial since long before the election of George W. Bush, whose incompetence, Ash believes, may lead to hegemony’s self-destruction. Ash, Berry, and Milbank find corporate capitalism behind America’s post-September 11 foreign policy, though none adopts a simplistically Marxist view.

David North is much more predictable than Ash and Berry in how he goes about making his case. Global empire is both unjust in itself and serves as a distraction from the need for more government intervention in the domestic economy. Even North recognizes, however, that the hidden hand of the market cannot work without a hidden fist. North blames McDonald’s; he might more properly blame McDonnell-Douglas.

More moderate liberal contributors, such as Stanley Hoffman of Harvard University, simply ask the United States to pay more heed to international law and international institutions. They speak with the voice of the establishment, and here the reader can find, in embryo, the foreign policy of a John Kerry administration. What Hoffman, Charles S. Maier (another Harvard professor), and David Marquand (formerly of Oxford) all recommend is not altogether different from what Charles Krauthammer would like to see. While Krauthammer and company believe in an American Empire unbridled by international institutions, the center-left wants an American Empire that works through international institutions. Within the broad party of empire, this may be a major point of contention, but, to those outside of that big tent, it looks like what Freud, right for once, called “the narcissism of small differences.”

The most important and most interesting of the chapters are those contributed by the reluctant imperialists who offer the reader a bit of historical perspective. German historian Peter Bender addresses the parallels (and divergences) between America and Rome and asks the most important question in the book: “Can the United States remain a republic if it rules an empire?” It is not a question Bender answers, although the reader may certainly draw his own conclusions from

the context provided by Roman history. American journalist Martin Walker, on the other hand, argues that the American Empire is nothing like Rome’s or, for that matter, Britain’s. Walker surely is right to caution against taking historical analogies too literally, but Bender, the better historian, is more persuasive—and incisive.

Bacevich likes the Rome metaphor enough to use it in the title of his own essay, “New Rome, New Jerusalem.” Specifically, Bacevich’s contribution is about how the New Jerusalem has become the New Rome, as America’s congenital messianic impulses have taken form in foreign policy. In the few pages he has here, Bacevich adds little to what he has said before in *American Empire*. He repeats his complaint from the earlier book that America is becoming too decadent a civilization to shoulder her imperial burdens. “Freedom has come to mean treating the market and market values as sacrosanct (the economic agenda of the Right) and celebrating individual autonomy (the cultural agenda of the Left).”

There is trouble to be found, too, in James Kurth’s “Who Will Do the Dirty Work?” which connects empire and immigration. In short, European imperial powers that once ruled over Third World countries (before they were called the Third World) now find themselves swamped with immigrants from their former colonies. Why has this happened? In part, naturally enough, because former colonies were convenient sources for cheap labor. “Colonial workers not only knew how to work; they also were more likely than non-colonial peoples to know the distinctive national language, codes, and rules of the citizens within the metropole.” In Europe, this postimperial immigration is creating two nations within each of the erstwhile mother countries: a rich, white, post-Christian nation and a poor, nonwhite, Muslim one. In America, however, mass immigration and imperialism already coexist, a phenomenon that Kurth predicts will transform the United States into an empire—with attendant ethnic and class-based stratifications—at home as well as abroad. When the empire eventually collapses, the immigrants will remain, and the metropole will effectively have been colonized by the people it once ruled.

Too few of the other essays in *The Imperial Tense* raise such problems, which considerably lessens the value of what is still a very worthwhile book. Too many of the contributors represent predictable,

unexamined party lines. It may be instructive to see how Charles Krauthammer couches his defense of imperialism; it is certainly entertaining to see how Deepak Lal does it. What, however, would either of these men make of the problems raised by James Kurth, or even the rather less trenchant ones brought to the fore by Bacevich? Most of the contributors to this volume simply assert themselves at cross-purposes to one another. No matter how candid or accessible they may be, very few of the writers in this anthology have even begun to come to grips with reality outside of their own beliefs, fears, and fantasies. This makes *The Imperial Tense* a rather more trivial exercise than *American Empire*.

The book should not be ignored, however. It would be worth reading, even owning, for the Kurth essay alone. Even where it fails, the book is useful as an illustration of how shortsighted some of its contributors are. It shows how the Bush administration could invade and occupy a country without having any clear plan ahead of time for administering the newly conquered province. Maybe there is something to what J.R. Seeley once said: Empires really can be acquired in a fit of absence of mind.

Absence of mind, if not empire, is a central theme of John Newhouse's *Imperial America: The Bush Assault on the World Order*, which offers a countervailing argument to Bacevich's *American Empire*. For Newhouse, the remarkable thing about Bush's foreign policy is its trailblazing ineptitude. On balance, Bacevich is probably closer to the truth, but Newhouse is valuable nonetheless for showing just how bad, even by the standards of the Clinton administration, Bush's foreign policy really is.

Newhouse, himself an official in the Clinton administration, has had a long and fruitful career shuttling between government and journalism, with a stopover at a think tank or two along the way. For many years, he wrote about foreign policy for the *New Yorker*. He issues a thoroughgoing indictment of the manner in which President Bush has conducted America's business abroad. That Newhouse himself is an establishment liberal is of little importance, because any thinking American can find much with which to agree in his case against Bush. So long as Newhouse keeps his account in the negative, he is in the right.

Newhouse devotes a chapter to each

member of David Frum's "Axis of Evil." In each case, the author shows that the President has failed to capitalize on the opportunities before him—that is, when he has not actually made things worse. Often enough, in Newhouse's account, a missed opportunity is the same thing as a situation made worse—as in the case of North Korea.

The Clinton administration, toward the end, was pursuing a risky strategy of diplomatic engagement with Kim Jong Il's Stalinist state and, on Newhouse's account, was inching toward an agreement on weapons inspections and nuclear nonproliferation. This may well have been wrongheaded, but Newhouse at least provides an argument for how it could have worked. Bush, on the other hand, has not had a very clearly defined policy toward North Korea, preoccupied as he has been with looking for weapons of mass destruction on the other side of the globe. Kim Jong Il, in the meantime, has moved ahead with plans to produce highly enriched uranium that might be used in a nuclear-weapons program. And, as Newhouse points out, the War in Iraq has given Kim all the more reason to want to acquire the kind of weapons that might deter the United States from attacking him.

Citing former CIA counterterrorism chief Vincent Cannistraro, Newhouse argues that including Iran in the Axis of Evil has been counterproductive, emboldening her anti-American hardliners while undermining her moderates. Newhouse is confident that, left to her own devices, Iran will liberalize. More than 65 percent of the population is under age 30, he notes, and internet connectivity and the availability of satellite television are growing rapidly. Such things do not augur well for the clerics, who have long since worn out their welcome with the people of Iran. Moreover, says Newhouse, Iran is actually in a position to become a very useful ally of the United States, to help in combating the resurgent Taliban in Afghanistan (there is no love lost between the Taliban and Iran), and, eventually, to provide a regional check on Pakistan, a more unstable, undemocratic country than Iran—and one that has nuclear weapons. Iran, properly guided, can be a stabilizing force in the region. President Bush, however, has preferred to treat Iran as an enemy.

His chapter on Iraq recapitulates what is by now a well-known tale of inflated threat and wise counsel ignored. He

has little original to add, but he still does some good by reminding the reader just how many establishment figures spoke out against the war on Iraq. Brent Scowcroft wrote an editorial saying that "an attack on Iraq at this time would seriously jeopardize, if not destroy, the global counter-terrorist campaign we have undertaken." He was far from alone. Retired Marine Corps Gen. Anthony Zinni spoke out. So did former secretary of state Lawrence Eagleburger and Nebraska Republican Sen. Chuck Hagel. George W. Bush, however, only had ears for Richard Perle and others who insisted on immediate war.

Newhouse also has a chapter on the strain that Bush's foreign policy has created between the United States and her allies, though his book opens and closes with broad treatments of the opportunities available to President Bush immediately after September 11 and those that are still present. The opening chapter, indeed, is a much-needed reminder of just how much goodwill there was toward the United States in the days and weeks following the destruction of the World Trade Center, and even following the war against the Taliban. That goodwill has since evaporated, replaced by varying degrees of anti-Americanism from Europe to the Third World. Newhouse seems to see some solipsism at work here: He notes at the end of his book that "The administration is trying to create reality, not deal with it." The joke will be on all of us if the President's folly succeeds in turning Saddam Hussein's imaginary weapons of mass destruction into somebody else's real ones.

LIBERAL ARTS

FREAKS, INDEED

"Freakmag.com 'the vibe for ardent enthusiasts' is proud to announce that we have released to the Internet a New Magazine which is about being a Jesus Freak, that is an ardent enthusiast of Jesus Christ. The premier issue features an exclusive In-Depth-Interview with the Reverend Richard Weaver A.K.A. 'Handshake Man.' Richard Weaver has been covered by CNN, ABC, NBC, CBS, FOX, The Associated Press, MSNBC, Washington Post, L.A. Times, N.Y. Times, and now for the first time In-Depth only at freakmag.com."

—from a February 25 press release
from freakmag.com

De Oppresso Liber

by Philip Jenkins

Bank's Bandits: The Untold Story of the Original Green Berets

by Edward F. Fitzgerald
Haverford, PA: Infinity Publishing;
453 pp., \$20.95



To say that Edward Fitzgerald is a retired lawyer who has written a memoir of his military experiences in the 1950's may not make his book sound at first like the most exciting literary project of the year. *Bank's Bandits* is, however, a highly readable work: a well-observed, literate, and often very funny account of recruitment and training in the original U.S. Special Forces formed during the Korean War, the 10th Special Forces Airborne Group. The book is also a helpful and evocative introduction to the Special Forces idea itself, which has done so much to revolutionize concepts of modern warfare.

At the start of the war in Afghanistan in 2001, President Bush's advisors were debating furiously whether U.S. intervention would demand "boots on the ground," an amazing notion that is used without much sense of its implications. Briefly described, the phrase suggests that wars can be won without any significant participation by ground troops, an idea that would have seemed astonishing to most generations of soldiers and planners. How can anyone win a war *without* thousands of boots in place? The new approach results, of course, from the force of modern airpower as well as from planners' fascination with small elite units who can operate behind enemy lines, often in cooperation with local rebels and militias.

The elite-force idea has its roots in the world of Lawrence of Arabia, though other important modern progenitors certainly include Waffen SS officer Otto Skorzeny, who formed and led German special forces for Hitler. (His greatest feat was the 1943 rescue of Mussolini.) Also influential were piratical British units such as the Special Air Service and the Long Range Desert Group. The U.S. tradition was represented by Col. Aaron Bank, whose unit reputedly was entrusted with a special mission to seize Hitler at Berchtesgaden. (Bank himself reported his own

experiences in his 1986 book, *From OSS To Green Berets: The Birth Of Special Forces*.)

After 1945, special-forces units attracted great attention in a world in which fast-moving formations were likely to overrun fixed defenses, placing a premium on stay-behind guerrilla activities and clandestine operations. His allegiances transferred to the Anglo-American West, Skorzeny himself became a principal planner of anticommunist resistance in the event of the long-expected Soviet invasion of democratic Europe. (His 1957 memoir, *Skorzeny's Special Missions*, still repays careful reading.) By the early 1950's, elite guerrilla units were a lively force in military thinking, Western and Eastern. (The Soviets developed their own Spetznaz.)

Such lofty strategic debates had little impact on the world of Edward Fitzgerald, an early recruit to the new Airborne Group. *Bank's Bandits* can certainly be read as a romp, with its tales of Special Forces exercises in Georgia directed against the overwhelming might of the Aggressor formations—that is, the 82nd Airborne. Among the heroic victories described by Fitzgerald are the great chicken raid, which involved purloining large portions of the 82nd's dinner, and an assault in which four of his colleagues defeated and destroyed an entire camp of the regular airborne units. We also hear of special units serving as "force multipliers," organizing the activities of local militia units. In this case, though, the ragged allies are not Afghan or Kurdish tribesmen but Dixie bootleggers and moonshiners, who have signed on to the cause, together with an octogenarian veteran whose glory days were in the time of Pershing and Pancho Villa.

These chapters make for particularly lively reading, but they also show how deep-rooted are some of the issues that would bedevil the later history of Special Forces. One, of course, is the rivalry with mainstream Army units and with conventionally minded officers not prepared to tolerate the distinctive standards and behavior demanded in unconventional warfare. Issues of washing, shaving, and saluting can all incite conflict. While the officers of *Bank's Bandits* were praising and rewarding their men for trampling standard operating practices underfoot in order to achieve their goals, mainstream officers were threatening Special Forces with court martial for doing exactly the same thing.

We can also see the roots of the Special Forces mythology: the image of the supermen who can speak any language, deploy any weapon, and accomplish virtually anything—it seems—up to and including psychokinesis and teleportation. The origins of this myth are not hard to find. If four men arrive in the night and ruin a much larger formation, they will develop an heroic reputation; it is comforting, moreover, for ordinary civilians to believe that such supermen are, in fact, out there somewhere fighting our wars for us.

To speak of a Special Forces myth does not for a second denigrate the real achievements of such units; it does, nevertheless, encourage a critical reading of memoirs that place sole emphasis on this kind of derring-do. For some writers, mythologizing Special Forces helps defuse the horrors of combat, by deemphasizing war as assembly-line butchery and stressing an individual heroism that recalls the knights and cavaliers of old—the "army of one" incarnate. For an understanding of the American mental attitude at the outset of the Vietnam War, the classic Western *The Magnificent Seven*, in which a handful of highly professional Americans organize a hitherto passive mass of Mexican peasants to rise up and fight off gangs of vicious bandits (who clearly symbolize the Vietcong), is invaluable. Whether in Mexico, Southeast Asia, or the Middle East, it seemed, a handful of Special Forces could work miracles: John Kennedy *loved* his Green Berets. (It is salutary to read, as a counterweight, the British mythologies of this kind discussed in John Newsinger's debunking text *Dangerous Men: The SAS and Popular Culture*.)

One of the pleasures of Fitzgerald's book is his treatment of the motivations of soldiers joining up with this or any comparable unit, their ordinariness, and the implausibility of the superman myth. We are left with an impression of intelligent, gutsy soldiers—but definitely men of this earth. Anyone wishing to understand modern warfare needs to pay full account to the Special Forces tradition. This shrewd and readable book is a valuable addition to that tradition in its literary aspect.

Philip Jenkins is the author, most recently, of Images of Terror: What We Can and Can't Know About Terrorism (Aldine de Gruyter).