

The Fall of the One-Party Empire

Contributed by MWC News
Thursday, 24 November 2005

Welcome to Camp Quagmire

For some time, I have been suggesting that the aim of Republican strategy has been a Republican Party that permanently runs the United States and a United States that permanently runs the world. The two aims have been driven by a common purpose: to steadily and irreversibly increase and consolidate power in Republican hands, leading in the direction of a one-party state at home and a global American empire abroad.

Op_ed,

Welcome to Camp Quagmire

On the cusp of that most American of holidays, Jonathan Schell offers us a "tour" of the American empire -- the global Pax Americana that wasn't -- and asks a simple question: Where exactly are the monuments of that empire? If it is now threatened with collapse, what exactly did it build?

I was Schell's editor on his book *The Unconquerable World* (published in the spring of 2003), and so, well before the Bush administration invaded Iraq, I had no doubt that our attempt to occupy an oil-rich land in the heart of the Middle East was bound to fail disastrously. No one who read Schell's exploration of the last three centuries of organized violence (and the hesitant birth of non-violent possibilities on our planet) could have assumed less. He and I often discussed the nature of the American empire and even exchanged letters on the subject at Tomdispatch back in early 2004 (Jonathan Schell on the empire that fell as it rose). For his latest *Nation* magazine "Letter from Ground Zero" -- which the editors of that publication have been kind enough to let Tomdispatch post -- I can't think of a better introduction than some eerily prophetic passages from *The Unconquerable World*. (Then, when you've also read his latest *Nation* column, take a brief whirl with me past various American imperial ziggurats and ruins.) While assessing the Bush administration's urge for global domination and its belief in what he had already dubbed "disarmament wars" meant to stop nuclear proliferation on the planet, Schell wrote:

"Even if we suppose that the United States will complete the transition from a republic to an empire, there are powerful reasons to believe that it will fail to realize its global ambitions, whether idealistic or self-interested. Any imperial plan in the twenty-first century tilts against what have so far proved to be the two most powerful forces of the modern age: the spread of scientific knowledge and the resolve of peoples to reject foreign rule and take charge of their own destinies. If the history of the last two centuries is a guide, neither can be bombed out of existence..."

"It's difficult to believe that the passion for self determination will be any easier to suppress than the spread of destructive technology... Historically, imperial rule has rested on three kinds of domination -- military, economic, and political. The United States enjoys unequivocal superiority in only one of these domains -- the military, and here only in the conventional sphere..."

"Most important, in the political arena, the United States is weak, precisely because in the contemporary world military force no longer translates easily into political rule. 'Covenants, without the sword, are but words,' Hobbes said. Since then, the world has learned that swords without covenants are but empty bloodshed. The Romans in ancient times were able to convert military victories into lasting political power. The United States today cannot. In the political arena, the lesson of the world revolt -- that winning military victories may sometimes be easy but building political institutions in foreign lands is hard, often impossible -- still obtains. The nation so keenly interested in 'regime change' has small interest in 'nation-building' and less capacity to carry it out. The United States is mistrusted, often hated, around the world. If it embarks on a plan of imperial domination, it will be hated still more. Can cruise missiles build nations? Does power still flow from the barrel of a gun -- or from a B-2 bomber? Can the world in the twenty-first century really be ruled from 35,000 feet? Modern peoples have the will to resist and the means to do so. Imperialism without politics is a naive imperialism. In our time, force can win a battle or two but politics is destiny."

Now set out to tour the failed imperium with Jonathan Schell as your guide. Tom

The Fall of the One-Party Empire
By Jonathan Schell

For some time, I have been suggesting that the aim of Republican strategy has been a Republican Party that permanently runs the United States and a United States that permanently runs the world. The two aims have been driven by a common purpose: to steadily and irreversibly increase and consolidate power in Republican hands, leading in the

direction of a one-party state at home and a global American empire abroad. The most critical question has been whether American democracy, severely eroded but still breathing, would bring down the Republican machine, or whether the Republican machine -- call it the budding one-party global empire -- would bring down American democracy. This week, it looks as if democracy, after years of decline, has gained the upper hand.

The choice was and remains: empire or republic? Just a few years ago, the "sole superpower," the new Rome, master of the "unipolar" world, seemed to many to be bestriding the world. Some, like columnist Charles Krauthammer, were reveling in the triumph of "the American hegemon." "History has given you an empire, if you will keep it" he said, traducing Benjamin Franklin, who had said at the Constitutional Convention that the United States was a republic if you can keep it.

Others, like writer Michael Ignatieff, in a more somber mood, were preparing to shoulder the empire's inescapable global "burdens," which meant "enforcing such order as there is in the world and doing so in the American interest." Still others, like journalist Robert Kaplan, were touring the empire's far-flung garrisons, lionizing the "imperial grunts" and counseling that America's civil leaders should yield to military direction. Indeed, he said that "the very distinction between our military and operations overseas is eroding." The model for the future, he thought, should be the United States' long history of military intervention in Latin America.

But where is the American empire now, where the new Rome? Where are its subject peoples, its provinces, its Macedonias and Carthages and Egypts, its victorious armies and triumphal parades? Where, for that matter, are its arts and letters, its Colossus of Rhodes, its pyramids? Where is its Virgil? Would that be Bill O'Reilly, fountain of abusive misinformation, or Dan Bartlett, the White House Misspokesman? Can someone give me a tour of this realm? We might begin in Iraq. But perhaps we had better not. The tour would have to be cut short in the Green Zone, the American compound in downtown Iraq and the only "secure" territory in the country. Last week, more than 200 Iraqis were killed in attacks by suicide bombers (horrors scarcely mentioned in the debate in this country). As for the Iraqi "government," these quislings are unable to follow imperial orders -- they are deficient even as puppets. Their main accomplishment has been to open a torture center, perhaps in imitation of our own Abu Ghraib, or perhaps following the model of Saddam Hussein.

Will Afghanistan be the next stop on our imperial tour? This will be the high point, for the pervasive rule by war- and drug-lords in that country is mitigated, at least in the capital city, by the administration of Hamid Karzai. Shall we go, as the President did recently, to Latin America, which Kaplan recommended as a dress rehearsal for imperial rule? We'll find that the United States is despised there, leading to the rise of left-wing leaders from Venezuela to Argentina. Or should we follow the President to Asia, where, in defiance of his will, North Korea has built a nuclear arsenal and China, with its \$252 billion in U.S. treasury bills, has emerged as the financier of the exploding American deficit?

The imperial dreams are in ruins. But the ruins, strangely, are not of things that were built and then collapsed; they are of fantasies. We are not dealing here with the decline of a new Rome. It is not that a great power has been brought down -- although the casualties of the war, American and Iraqi, have been tragically real -- but that a world of fancy and fraud has been exploded by facts.

And the one-party state at home? It was not the mirage that the empire was. The structure of the American state and, to a lesser extent, the economy, really has been deeply altered. Real hundreds of millions of dollars have poured into the coffers of the GOP while real hundreds of billions poured into the pockets of the rich. Real laws were passed that tore gaping holes in the Bill of Rights. A real shift of the judiciary toward the radical right was set in motion. An unprecedented concentration of power -- fusing government, corporations, the military, portions of the media, and a hugely expanded secret police apparatus -- was created. And yet this structure, too, has been shaken by recent events.

As happened in the Vietnam era, the war came home. The administration's disrespect for law led to law-breaking. Somehow, the law enforcement system in and around the Justice Department has retained enough independence to serve as a check on abuses of executive power. Indictments have been brought, and others are likely to follow. The mechanisms whereby the foreign debacle has led to the domestic setbacks for the Administration are complex but the broad outlines are already clear: The failed empire, in the shape of its failed war, has driven down the President's support to the point at which others, cowed until now, feel free to attack him. The institutions of government and the economy, drawn like iron filings into the magnetic field of power, failed at first to check the administration. But the public, represented by opinion polls, has stepped in, and the institutions are following. Not since the Soviet Union fell fourteen years ago have we witnessed a greater reversal of fortune.

Unmaking the conglomeration of unaccountable power built up around the Republican Party in recent years will hardly be the work of a week, and the outcome is anything but certain. But if the effort succeeds, historians may one day write that the fake American empire was the Achilles heel of the real one-party state.

Jonathan Schell, author of *The Unconquerable World*, is the Nation Institute's Harold Willens Peace Fellow. The Jonathan Schell Reader was recently published by Nation Books.

Copyright 2005 Jonathan Schell

This column will appear in the upcoming issue of The Nation Magazine.

American Ziggurats, Imperial Ruins, and Other Wonders of the Modern Age
By Tom Engelhardt

Bertolt Brecht wrote this of empire long ago:

"Who built the seven gates of Thebes?
The books are filled with names of kings.
Was it the kings who hauled the craggy blocks of stone?
And Babylon, so many times destroyed.
Who built the city up each time?...
In the evening when the Chinese wall was finished
Where did the masons go? Imperial Rome
Is full of arcs of triumph. Who reared them up?"

In the case of the American imperium, such as it is, the builders seem largely to have been in the hire of our Vice President's favorite corporation, Halliburton (and its subsidiary KBR). So here's a quick whirl through the monuments of our empire -- through, that is, Halliburton World.

American Ziggurats

Iraq -- Camp Victory North: A monument to Halliburton's construction skills and one of the largest American bases built anywhere in the world since the Vietnam War, Camp Victory North is little short of "a small American city," meant to hold 14,000 troops. It has the only Burger King stand in Iraq as well as "a gym, the country's biggest PX -- and, of course, a separate compound for KBR workers, who handle both construction and logistical support." Its name, with that "mission accomplished" ring to it, caught the spirit of a moment. When it turned out that victory in Iraq had, like all those WMDs, gone missing in action, it was redubbed Camp Liberty (scroll down), freedom evidently being what you get when victory is beyond reach. Had Bush era military commanders been in a more modest or even prophetic mood in 2003, they might have named the base Camp Stalemate, Camp Quagmire, or even Camp Defeat. While the cost of Camp Liberty remains unknown, literally billions of dollars have gone into America's "enduring camps" (as they were for a time so charmingly called lest we have "permanent bases" in Iraq). Monuments to the neocon empire-to-come, such bases newly built across the "arc of instability," elaborately linked into an American global communications network, were never meant for the likes of Iraqis. Of course, our mega-base in Danang wasn't meant for the likes of Vietnamese either.

Afghanistan -- "The Salt Pit": An interrogation and prison facility built, run, and paid for by the CIA, but ostensibly an "Afghan" prison, the "Salt Pit" was set up inside the shell of an abandoned Kabul brick factory... It is known that at least one prisoner, left bruised and naked in his cell, froze to death there under CIA care. Relocated onto Bagram Air Force Base, a former Russian enduring camp that is now the key American military center in the country, it remains a marvel of Dick Cheney's Interrogation World and part of a network of semi-secret interrogation centers, holding camps, and prisons set up by the U.S. that has turned Afghanistan, in the words of two British reporters who visited some of the sites, into the "hub" of a global interrogation system. Maybe it's not the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, but hanging from a wall in chains isn't out of the question.

Cuba -- Guantánamo: Located in balmy Cuba is a tropical paradise of a prison, as our Secretary of Defense pointed out. ("Guantánamo Bay's climate is different than Afghanistan. To be in an 8-by-8 cell in beautiful, sunny Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, is not inhumane treatment.") Built just off-shore from the continental U.S. on territory ceded to us more or less in perpetuity and, the Bush administration hoped, just far enough away to be beyond the oversight of Congress or the courts, it was another KBR construction playground. A "model facility," according to former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs Gen. Richard Myers, it is a must-stop on any tour of imperial hot spots and highlights. We suggest you book passage well in advance. The group tours are somewhat controlled and limited in nature, as a UN rights team found out recently, and air travel conditions to the prison are considered rough. Dog lovers are, however, especially welcomed.

The Bavarian Alps -- Edelweiss Lodge and Resort: For hard-working American military personnel (and fans of The Sound of Music) tired of holding down a recalcitrant world, a little peaceable kingdom that offers a few quiet hours zipping down snow-covered slopes or a wondrous weekend away from it all, without a mortar shell or IED in sight. In fact, no one should miss the Pentagon's Edelweiss Lodge and Resort with its Alpental Golf Course, Hausberg Sport Lodge, and (among its many restaurants) Zuggy's Base Camp, a mountain-style bistro -- not to speak of the well-advertised guided

tours to nearby "Dachau World War II Concentration Camp" and Hitler's lovely hideaway and aerie, Berchtesgaden and the Eagle's Nest. ("Service members and their families on R&R leave or block leave status from Operation Iraqi Freedom, Operation Enduring Freedom and The Balkans are all eligible to receive this incredible package deal.") Edelweiss is part of another kind of monumental global network -- Armed Forces Recreation Centers -- that includes the Dragon Hill Lodge, described this way: "Welcome to the Land of the Morning Calm in Seoul, Korea. Supporting the Yongsan military community, Dragon Hill Lodge has a myriad of services including a first class fitness and health club, restaurants, lounges, and a specialty shopping mall. The hotel is a pleasant escape from the bustle and excitement of downtown Seoul."

Something Borrowed (or Empire-on-the-Sly, CIA-Style)

Prisons and torture facilities in such allied countries as Morocco, Egypt, Thailand, Syria, and elsewhere. Just the perfect place to send a kidnapped terror suspect, snatched off the streets of any city in the world.

Airfields in Sweden, Germany, Spain, Italy, Malta, and other centrally located yet out of the way spots where you can touch down while secretly facilitating CIA renditions of torture suspects to the facilities mentioned above -- as well as convenient fields in such terrorism vacation spots as Baghdad, Cairo, Tashkent and Kabul. Heck what's a little national sovereignty when you're an empire!

Compounds of the former Soviet Gulag (possibly in Poland and Rumania) to stash away prisoners and trigger memories of fallen empires past.

5 Star Hotels to hang out in (at the taxpayer's expense) while you prepare to snatch war-on-terror suspects off the streets of Milan or rest up from the extraordinary exertions of extraordinary renditions.

Touring the Ruins of Empire

Who doesn't like a good imperial ruin? Millions flock to Pompeii, so why not Sunny Fallujah, once the "city of mosques" with a quarter-million inhabitants, but massively destroyed in November 2004 by American planes, artillery, tanks, and mortars and now being picturesquely rebuilt as a giant Orwellian prison-camp city. Don't miss the retinal ID scans on your way in, but be careful to stay in your Humvee. Despite the best efforts of the American military, dangers abound.

Copyright 2005 Tom Engelhardt