

Beyond Westphalia:
Why Neo-Imperialism is the True New World Order

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(Based on Empire Lite by Michael Ignatieff)

The United States should accept the fact that it is a modern imperial power and get on with the task. That is the essential message of Empire Lite by Canadian scholar Michael Ignatieff. As the chirpy title implies, Ignatieff is critical of Americans not for their imperial role in the world, but for the fact that they remain too loosely committed to it. Ignatieff proposes that American foreign policy accept an essential paradox: that imperialism is sometimes necessary to advance democracy and human rights in the world. Armed with this moral justification, neo-imperialism should then be pursued with vigour and commitment, rather than with uncertainty and stinginess, as is now too often the case.

This central thesis is interesting and worthy in its own right. However, it is also significant for another reason: it provides an intellectual template for the so-called War on Terror, the American-led effort to eliminate rogue and failed states as breeding grounds for anti-Western, and particularly anti-American, activities, notably terrorism. This War on Terror has been the centrepiece of the foreign policy of U.S. President George W. Bush, and indeed, of his presidency. Ignatieff's ideas provide a thoughtful intellectual model for the Bush approach and also identify some of its potential perils. Perhaps without even fully realizing it himself, Ignatieff has provided a blueprint for a truly new world order – one that is bound to be controversial and whose implications may not be fully understood, even by those who are creating it.

First of all, it is necessary to examine and explain Ignatieff's main message. His thesis rests upon the following assertions: (1) Some of the world's states have failed because some societies are simply not ready or capable of governing themselves. (2) Such failure is a danger to everyone because these states breed and export such problems as terrorism and general instability. They also require costly humanitarian aid. (3) These situations require the use of military force to create and maintain a secure environment in which humanitarian aid and re-building can take place. (4) The involvement of the United States, as the world's sole remaining superpower, in this project is essential. (5) This involvement must somehow be consistent with the prevailing global ethos of human rights, self-determination and state sovereignty. (6) The only way to achieve this is to make military intervention and reconstruction temporary projects, with the goal of restoring all states to full sovereignty. (7) Temporary, however, does not and cannot mean partial. A full, committed and unapologetic effort is necessary to see this project through. This last point is a warning to world leaders not to underestimate the global tasks to which they commit.

First of all, there are several examples of failed states in the world. The concept of a failed state is that an independent and sovereign country fails to deliver on its most basic responsibilities: maintaining order, meeting basic human needs and protecting fundamental human rights. Furthermore, this is not an isolated or confined phenomenon. There are many states in varying degrees of failure all around the world, enough to, "create an ongoing crisis of order in a globalized world" (124). Unfortunately, the decolonization which followed the Second World War did not deliver on the promise of peaceful and prosperous self-governing states. However fine a principle self-government might be, the reality must be confronted that it has not always worked.

Furthermore, as the events of September 11, 2001 showed, in a globalized world, failed states can constitute a threat to everyone, even superpowers.

While failed states may represent a humanitarian crisis, humanitarian solutions alone are not enough. For many years, the West has had a misplaced faith that development and world trade would pull these states out of despair, while ignoring the reality that such growth cannot happen without order and stability (124). Consequently, direct humanitarian aid and reconstruction are in fact necessary. However, this cannot occur without military help, for the simple reason that humanitarian services cannot operate effectively in a war zone. If they could, war-torn countries wouldn't need humanitarian aid. Bosnia, Kosovo and Afghanistan are cases in point; military power was necessary to make humanitarian reconstruction possible (19).

This marriage of humanitarianism and military force (which Ignatieff bluntly calls "imperialism") has generally employed a division of labour where the United States supplies the military force and Europe provides the economic, humanitarian and diplomatic support. Robert Kagan has described this as the United States "making the dinner" while the Europeans "do the dishes."ⁱ Kagan and Ignatieff attribute this largely to the fact that the U.S. is now, "the West's last military nation state" (15). The devastation of the two world wars, followed by the U.S. essentially bearing the burden of Western European security during the Cold War, created in Europe a political culture in which the use of military force is not popular. While Ignatieff presents this as a necessary if unequal arrangement, it also echoes some of the more critical assessments of U.S. hegemony. As David Malone puts it: "There's a clear risk that Washington will conceive the UN's role mainly as one of long-term peace-building after short, sharp U.S.-led military interventions (whether mandated by the UN Security Council or not.)"ⁱⁱ This certainly appears to have been the recent thinking in Iraq. So while American military power is essential, it can also be overwhelming.

However, to portray modern American hegemony as little more than a revival – for good or for ill – of old imperialism only tells half of the story. While it is imperialism, by definition, because it uses force and power to reorder the world (24), it is a new and fundamentally different form of imperialism. The reason for this is that modern imperialism – i.e. the combination of American military power with European humanitarian reconstruction – is rooted in a prevailing global ethos of human rights, self-determination and state sovereignty. This, of course, seems incongruous, in that these values actually arose out of opposition to the empires of old. As Ignatieff points out: "America itself is the product of an eighteenth-century revolt against an empire; all of the [European] states reluctantly linked to the American imperial project are ex-imperial powers consciously attempting to put their imperial ways behind them" (17). In fact, the core beliefs of our time are the creations of anti-colonial struggles: the idea that all human beings are equal and that each group of humans has a right to rule themselves, free of foreign influence (122). However, modern imperialism is different, in that it is actually based on an overarching belief in democracy. The resolution of this apparent contradiction is the most interesting part of Ignatieff's thesis.

The critical factor that makes neo-imperialism different is that, to reconcile itself with these global values, it embraces and employs a new concept: temporary nation-building. Nation-building is the concept that intervention and reconstruction are entirely directed at one ultimate aim: restoring self-rule. Occupying another country in perpetuity

cannot be justified. Occupying a country only until its state apparatus can be re-built and control turned back over to its people, however, can be. Nation-building with the aim of restoring self-rule, then, can still fit within a global ethos of self-determination. However, for it to have credibility, it must also appear to make genuine progress towards this goal. This is where the importance of the so-called “exit strategy” comes in. Nation-building – i.e. imperialism – must be temporary. In fact, the only form of empire that is compatible with democracy is temporary empire (24 emphasis added).

However, important as the concept of temporary empire is, it is also fraught with peril. Ignatieff ends his book with a warning to Western democracies not to become impatient or irresolute. Neo-imperialism’s great moral distinctions, its temporary intentions and democratic underpinnings, are also its greatest potential weaknesses. He warns of the inherent short-term pressures democracy puts on Western leaders. For instance, as the current U.S. election appears to be demonstrating, no modern incumbent wants to be saddled with an imperial failure in an election year (116). New empires depend, ultimately, on the staying power of electorates, but democratic peoples can make “fickle imperialists.” (116). After all, voters would rather have a hospital built next door than in a far-away foreign land (116). However, such impatience and isolationist thinking is short-sighted because nation-building (i.e. imperial engagement) by the West is ultimately necessary for domestic security. This stands as an explicit warning to not scrimp on modern imperialism.

After having examined Ignatieff’s principal ideas, it is necessary to consider how they apply to the world today. The most obvious way is that the so-called “imperial project” can also be considered the “War on Terror.” Americans, for historical and cultural reasons, are particularly reluctant to identify their current foreign policy agenda as imperialist, but it is. It is interesting to note that during his 2000 presidential election campaign, George W. Bush took an isolationist stand, arguing that it was not the role of the U.S. to engage in “nation-building” around the world.ⁱⁱⁱ However, after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the new president changed his position and instead began to advocate a policy of “pre-emptive deterrence” where the United States reserves the right to, “defend our interests at home and abroad by identifying and destroying the threat before it reaches our borders.”^{iv} A few months after the September 11 attacks, U.S. forces were in Afghanistan attempting to restore order to a chaotic, impoverished and isolated part of the world. This is the essence of the War on Terror: an obvious and definite shift towards a U.S. policy of re-ordering the world, often by military force. The War on Terror is really nation-building, and nation-building is really imperialism. Whether they fully realize it or not, Americans have taken up the burden of modern imperialism.

Clearly, there is a strong case for a new world order in which the necessity of temporary imperialism, principally enforced by the United States and supported by its Western allies, is accepted. In fact, such a new world order has already come into existence with the War on Terror. This places an awesome responsibility on the West to see this project through and to finally, properly correct and complete the decolonialization of the postwar era.

First and foremost, the world must accept the fact that the postwar dream of the “age of empire” being succeeded by “an age of independent, equal and self-governing nation states” (123) has simply not happened and is, in fact, years and years away from fruition. The reality is that mature, stable, developed and democratic states which respect

human rights will have to assert leadership over those that are not and do not. This will require moral confidence and resolve. It will also require a fundamental re-thinking of the primacy that is still accorded to state sovereignty in international affairs. There was already a growing consensus in the world that, after the horrific massacres in Rwanda in 1994, intervention to prevent genocide is morally justified and, in fact, morally imperative. This, in fact, became the thrust of a 2001 UN report titled The Responsibility to Protect. It asserted precisely that, when sovereign states fail in their basic mission to protect their own citizens, the responsibility falls to the broader global community.^v This report was the work of the aptly-named International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty, of which Ignatieff was a member.

The West demonstrated this growing conviction four years later when it launched a short war against Yugoslavia to prevent a potentially similar massacre in Kosovo. However, this reasoning has now been taken beyond genocide in the post-September 11 cases of Afghanistan and Iraq. The new reasoning is that sovereign states that fail to prevent and control terrorism constitute a threat to all other nations and that these nations may respond in self-defence. The United States invoked Article 51 of the UN Charter, which affirms the right to self-defence^{vi}, when it invaded Afghanistan in 2001 on the grounds that the Afghan government had been complicit in allowing the September 11 terrorist attacks to happen. In many respects this new world order is already upon us. The task now is to ensure that global institutions accept and reflect it.

To that end, this essay will conclude with two principal assertions. The first is that the Westphalian model of state sovereignty must be replaced with something more accurate and relevant. As mentioned, state sovereignty is already often considered secondary to human rights and now sometimes even to global security. Former Canadian Prime Minister Brian Mulroney made this point in a 2003 speech in Texas, when he advocated “re-thinking the limits of national sovereignty.”^{vii} He noted that Iraq was then blocking UN arms inspections and that other countries had recently blocked food delivery to starving people – all on grounds of national sovereignty. He described such invocations as offensive as the police declining to stop family violence on the grounds that a man’s home is his castle.^{viii} Clearly, the Westphalian model of absolute state sovereignty is archaic. In fact, much of the work of the UN and other global organizations in the postwar era has been to promote international security and human rights, but to do so nominally under a rubric of state sovereignty. It is now time to stop trying to square that circle and accept that global governance should have a different shape altogether, one in which people’s right to self-rule is one of many rights including survival, security, freedom and dignity.

Secondly, this paper contends that, even in a neo-imperial world enforced by a sole superpower, multilateral institutions are still desirable and, in fact, necessary. This is, in part, simply because the United States, as large and powerful as it is, cannot carry all the burdens of neo-imperialism alone. Ignatieff warns that all empires have been weakened by over-stretching themselves (4). Mulroney made a similar point, noting that: “...the more extended U.S. forces become, the more vulnerable they are to attack.”^{ix} Also, and equally important, is the fact that an entirely U.S.-led effort would concentrate too much power in the hand of the U.S. While the United States is certainly a liberal democracy that can be expected to act in accordance with liberal-democratic values, it can only help to have like-minded allies offer their guidance as well. No one country,

however laudable its aims, can be trusted to be entirely altruistic. Diversity and debate, even within the broad framework of liberal democratic neo-imperialism, are still healthy and constructive. As Mulroney concluded:

Without U.S. engagement, there can be no effective multilateral effort. But, without close support and unvarnished counsel from its allies, the U.S. will inevitably exercise its own will. Only the U.S. and her allies have the unique combination of vast economic strength, extraordinary military power and a history of willingness to assume burdens in the defence of freedom.^x

To use Kaplan's kitchen metaphor, allies like Canada and Europe should still do some cooking, because we need more on the menu than just Texas beef. While neo-imperialism squares the circle of self-determination and human rights, an updated model of global governance is now required to square the circle of neo-imperialism and multilateralism.

In conclusion, the world must embrace a new world order, both in principle and in process. It must accept the fact that a new form of temporary liberal-democratic imperialism is necessary and, in fact, honourable. It must accept that while this effort will be U.S.-led, the United States cannot and should not be left to bear the entire burden alone. Perhaps most importantly, it must accept that this course of action will have significant costs, and that it must not falter in its resolve to bear them. This new world order will require a re-examination of some long-held principles, such as that of Westphalian sovereignty. It will also require a reforming of global institutions to ensure that they reflect these new realities and are conducive to meaningful action and cooperation. Our end goal must ultimately remain a world of equal, responsible and sovereign states. However, we must accept the paradox that neo-imperialism is still a necessary step along that path. Before imperialism can be properly retired, it must first be properly re-tried.

Endnotes and Bibliography

Unless otherwise indicated by roman numeral notations (see below) all references are to Michael Ignatieff, Empire Lite, 2003, Penguin Canada, 10 Alcorn Avenue, Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

ⁱ Robert Kagan, “Power and Weakness,” Policy Review, issue number 113. Available at www.policyreview.org

ⁱⁱ David Malone, “It’s lonely at the top,” The Globe and Mail, Monday, October 20, 2003.

ⁱⁱⁱ William Saletan and Avi Zenilman, “The Worldview of George W. Bush,” posted Tuesday, August 12, 2003 at 2:06 p.m. PT on Slate at <http://slate.msn.com>

^{iv} *ibid*

^v The Responsibility to Protect: Report of the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty, December, 2001, published by the International Development Research Centre, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada.

^{vi} Charter of the United Nations, posted on the UN website: <http://www.un.org/aboutun/charter/index.html>

^{vii} Brian Mulroney, “A new world order,” The Globe and Mail, Thursday, October 21, 2003, adapted from a speech by the former Canadian Prime Minister at the George Bush Presidential Library Foundation, College Station, Texas, U.S.A.

^{viii} *ibid*

^{ix} *ibid*

^x *ibid*