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Mr. Obama, Tear Down This Empire

By Laurence Vance
June 14, 2009

Twenty-two years ago, June 12, 1987, President Ronald Reagan made a speech in front of the Brandenburg Gate at the Berlin Wall in which he implored Mikhail Gorbachev to “tear down this wall.” Within a year, the wall that symbolized repression and tyranny did in fact come crashing down. But with the demise of the Soviet Union, there is something else that should likewise have been toppled: the U.S. empire of troops and bases that encircles the globe.

Mr. Obama, Tear down this empire.

The kingdom of Alexander the Great reached to the borders of India. The Roman Empire controlled Western Europe and the Hellenized states that bordered the Mediterranean. The Mongol Empire stretched from Southeast Asia to Europe. The Byzantine Empire lasted over a thousand years. The Ottoman Empire stretched from the Persian Gulf in the east to Hungary in the northwest; and from Egypt in the south to the Caucasus in the north. At the height of its dominion, the British Empire included almost a quarter of the world’s population.

Nothing, however, compares to the U.S. global empire. It is an empire that would make Alexander the Great, Caesar Augustus, Genghis Khan, Suleiman the Magnificent, Emperor Justinian, and King George V proud. What makes U.S. hegemony unique is that it consists, not of control over great landmasses or population centers, but of a global presence unlike that of any other country in history.

Sure, Donald Rumsfeld maintained: “We don’t seek empires. We’re not imperialistic. We never have been.” Right. Just like Iraq had weapons of mass destruction. Just like the war in Iraq was supposed to be a cakewalk. Just like Bush told us, “we don’t torture.” Some neocons are a bit more honest, like CFR Senior Fellow Max Boot, who rejects the term “imperialism,” but [insists](#) that the United States “should definitely embrace the practice.”

Those who believe that it is in the national interest of the United States to intervene in conflicts around the globe, attempt to control foreign governments, and spread our political

and economic systems to other countries by force argue that we are not an empire because we haven't annexed any country's soil in over a hundred years. But America's unprecedented global presence of troops, bases, and ships clearly says otherwise.

The extent of the U.S. global empire is almost incalculable. The Department of Defense's "[Base Structure Report](#)" states that the Department's physical assets consist of "more than 545,700 facilities (buildings, structures and linear structures) located on more than 5,400 sites, on approximately 40 million acres." There are 268 sites in Germany alone. The 316,238 buildings occupied by the DOD comprise over 2.2 billion square feet with a value of over \$455 billion. The DOD manages almost 30 million acres of land worldwide. There are over 700 U.S. military bases on foreign soil in 63 countries. The United States has official commitments to provide security to over 35 countries.

In addition to the 1.1 million U.S. military personnel stationed in the United States and its territories, there are almost 300,000 U.S. troops in foreign countries—not even counting the over 200,000 U.S. soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan. With its geographic command centers (NORTHCOM, CENTCOM, etc.) that cover the globe, the United States apparently views the whole earth as its territory. According to the DOD's quarterly report titled "Active Duty Military Personnel Strengths by Regional Area and by Country," there are U.S. troops stationed in 146 countries and 12 territories in every corner of the globe. This means that U.S. troops occupy about 75 percent of the world's countries.

Although President Obama has talked about removing thousands of U.S. troops from Iraq, it should come as no surprise that the United States will have its forces in Iraq for many years to come. There are 82,460 U.S. soldiers in Europe to face a non-existent Soviet Union. There are still 33,286 troops in Japan—almost seventy years after World War II. But even where the United States did not fight a war, there are large numbers of U.S. troops to be found. There are 1,220 U.S. soldiers stationed in Spain and 9,426 soldiers stationed in the United Kingdom. What are 41 U.S. soldiers doing soaking up the sun in the Bahamas? What strategic interest is there in the United States having soldiers in places like Australia and New Zealand? The United States has troops in places most Americans couldn't even locate on a map—like Tunisia and Cameroon. And in addition to military personnel, the Department of Defense employs 700,000 civilians worldwide, including thousands of foreign nationals.

The DOD's personnel, bases, weapons, and equipment come with a heavy price.

According to economist and historian [Robert Higgs](#), real U.S. defense spending is around \$1 trillion. This accounts for over half of the world's military-related spending. The United States is also the world's chief arms dealer, as the residents of Gaza recently discovered.

But instead of all of this being an example of imperialism, empire, and foreign policy on steroids, we are [told](#) by neoconservative intellectuals that the United States is merely exercising "benevolent hegemony," that America "has been the greatest force for good in the world during the past century," and that the invasion of Iraq was "the greatest act of benevolence one country has ever done for another."

With troops in about 100 countries and territories, the U.S. empire was firmly in place soon after World War II. But the "[Good War](#)" was not the beginning. Between the two world wars, U.S. troops were sent to Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Russia, Panama, Honduras, Yugoslavia, Guatemala, Turkey, and China. But World War I was not the beginning either.

Before the “Great War,” U.S. troops were sent to Nicaragua, Panama, Honduras, the Dominican Republic, Korea, Cuba, Nicaragua, China, and Mexico. And although we might begin the U.S. empire with the seizure from Spain of Cuba, Puerto Rico, the Philippines, and Guam during the Spanish-American War of 1898, we can actually go back a few years earlier to U.S. intervention in Hawaii *before* we deposed the monarch and annexed the territory.

U.S. foreign policy can only be described as aggressive, reckless, belligerent, and meddling. Its fruits are the destabilization and overthrow of governments, the destruction of industry and infrastructure, the backing of military coups, death squads, and drug traffickers, imperialism under the guise of humanitarianism, support for corrupt and tyrannical governments, brutal sanctions and embargoes, and failed attempts to police the world. U.S. foreign policy results in nothing but discord, strife, hatred, and terrorism toward the United States. U.S. foreign policy is also very arrogant. What would Americans think if some country—any country—stated its intention to construct a naval base in Key West, Florida? They would be outraged. So why the double standard? Does might make right? What gives the United States the right to encircle the world with bases?

Mr. Obama, Tear down this empire.

It is not enough for the president just to close down the Guantánamo prison in Cuba. The Guantánamo Bay Naval Base, which the United States has occupied for over 100 years, should be closed as well. The problem with the Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC) Commission is that military base realignment and closure recommendations are all in the United States. All Status of Forces Agreements should be rescinded, all foreign bases closed, and all troops brought home. Yes, it’s a radical proposal, but only because America has long ago rejected the Founding Fathers foreign policy of nonintervention.

Now, we know that one man shouldn’t have so much power over so much. But the Congress that hasn’t issued a declaration of war since World War II—while funding several major wars and scores of other military interventions since then—isn’t going to do anything to significantly change U.S. foreign policy. And historically, it has been the executive branch that drives U.S. foreign policy anyway.

And to ensure that no future president again expands the U.S. empire, we need, not a renewal of the War Powers Act, but something with some real teeth, like Marine Corps Major General [Smedley Butler](#)’s (1881–1940) proposed peace amendment. This amendment would prohibit the removal of the Army from within the continental limits of the United States, the Navy from steaming more than 500 miles from the coast, and the Air Force from flying more than 750 miles from American soil. This “would be absolute guarantee to the women of America that their loved ones never would be sent overseas to be needlessly shot down in European or Asiatic or African wars that are no concern of our people.”

Butler reasoned that because of “our geographical position, it is all but impossible for any foreign power to muster, transport and land sufficient troops on our shores for a successful invasion.” In this he was merely echoing Thomas Jefferson, who recognized that geography was one of the great advantages of the United States: “At such a distance from Europe and with such an ocean between us, we hope to meddle little in its quarrels or combinations. Its peace and its commerce are what we shall court.”

But even without the advantage of geography, a policy of nonintervention is sufficient, as Congressman Ron Paul (R-TX) has pointed out: “Countries like Switzerland and Sweden who promote neutrality and non-intervention have benefited for the most part by remaining secure and free of war over the centuries.”

A policy of nonintervention doesn’t mean that the United States should refuse to issue visas, trade, extradite criminals, allow travel abroad, or allow immigration. As Jefferson said in his first inaugural address: “Peace, commerce, and honest friendship with all nations—entangling alliances with none.”

Mr. Obama, if you welcome change and openness, there is one sign the United States can make that would be unmistakable, that would advance dramatically the cause of freedom and peace. President Obama, if you seek peace, if you seek relief from bloated military budgets for the United States and the rest of the world, close down the overseas military bases. Mr. Obama, bring the troops home. Mr. Obama, tear down this empire!