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It's Obama's Empire Now

By Stanley Kutler

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The American Empire is alive and well—and as expansive as ever. We have established more than 700 military bases across the world, largely encircling the peripheries of Russia and China, which are now central to the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts. The Cold War in the aftermath of World War II drove the expansion as we searched for security—and markets, to be sure.

Perhaps we now are the largest imperial power the world ever has known. Bagram Air Base in Afghanistan trivializes the once-massive naval and air facility at Cam Ranh Bay during the Vietnam War, and we have developed “permanent” mega-bases in Iraq. We engage in denial, and euphemisms abound. Stumping for the colonial takeover of the Philippines in 1901, Theodore Roosevelt, so fashionable today, insisted that “there is not an imperialist in the country. ... Expansion? Yes. ... Expansion has been the law of our national growth.” Chalmers Johnson reminds us of Democrat Woodrow Wilson’s liberal “idealist imperialism,” which would make the world safe for democracy. (See Johnson’s “The Sorrows of Empire: Militarism, Secrecy, and the End of the Republic” and other works.) Deceit comes from the top.

Johnson cites neoconservative journalist Charles Krauthammer, who, as we embarked on the Afghanistan war, touted the British model and remarked that “Afghanistan and other troubled lands today cry out for the sort of enlightened foreign administration once provided by self-confident Englishmen in jodhpurs and pith helmets.” Oh? Then why did

the British with their jodhpurs and pith helmets fail in Afghanistan, as did the Russians, whether Cossacks with swords or Soviets with missiles? Why did the British ignominiously retreat from their empire, and why did the Soviets tuck tail and leave Afghanistan in the 1980s? Rather pathetic models, and hardly to be emulated, one would think.

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton recently visited the Republic of Georgia, which Russia had invaded in 2008 in helping establish independence for two breakaway provinces. George W. Bush and Condoleezza Rice expressed outrage and sympathy for the Georgians—who sit astride the oil-rich Caucasus. We are still at it, now in a “bipartisan” manner, pushing for, or appearing to push for, NATO membership for Georgia. When asked to specify why Georgia was so important for the United States, [Clinton responded](#) with glittering generalities of support—no blank check here, only evasion.

Clinton ardently courted an informal alliance. She reiterated the U.S. “commitment” to Georgia’s sovereignty and territorial integrity. Further, she said that the U.S. “does not recognize spheres of influence”—meaning Russian. In one sense, the statement reflected our foreign policy since 1945, while we of course maintained and expanded our own spheres of influence. The Monroe Doctrine since the 19th century offers ample evidence, and then add the Truman Doctrine, NATO and the now-forgotten CENTO and SEATO.

The Soviet Union is history, but Russia has maintained its “spheres of influence.” After the collapse of communism, Georgia and Russia renewed their economic ties, but tensions over the country’s European ambitions, the desire of some political groups to join NATO, the discord over Georgian involvement with Chechen rebels, and Russian ambitions for the provinces of South Ossetia left Russia less than thrilled with the Georgian government. The 2008 invasion underlined Moscow’s determination to maintain its own “sphere of influence.”

The Obama administration is thoroughly committed to defense of the empire it inherited; there is no or little retreat from the mindless expansion of American ambition. Teddy Roosevelt would be proud. Why are supporters of Barack Obama dismayed and shocked by his Afghanistan course, when, after all, in his 2008 campaign he promised nothing less? In his first presidential campaign debate with John McCain, Obama said: “We have seen Afghanistan worsen, deteriorate. We need more troops there. We need more resources there. ... So I would send two to three additional brigades to Afghanistan.”

Democrats and liberals so fear the war-loving right that they believe they must have their own adventures. But this is not 1961, when President John F. Kennedy told an enthralled nation that we “we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe, in order to assure the survival and the success of liberty.” And thus he brought the Vietnam quagmire. There are limits to our power; sadly, presidential candidates will not utter that truth, whatever painful adventures we have had. Obama might remember what he said in 2002: “I don’t oppose all wars. What I am opposed to is a dumb war. What I am opposed to is a rash war.” Our diminished capacities and

resources make such endeavors problematic. We cannot ignore present realities and forget the past.

Republican National Chairman Michael Steele recently attacked the Obama administration's Afghanistan war efforts in a thoughtful statement. Typically, the media jumped on him—NPR called it his “gaffe”—and his speech contained the media's Sound Bite of the Week: “a war of Obama's choosing.” Steele's remarks, which include a larger criticism of the war, are worth reading in full. [Editor's note: Click [here](#) to see a transcript of Steele's comment.]

Even a stopped clock is right twice a day. The Republican ever-ready war hawks assailed Steele, who has no visible supporters within his party, let alone among Democrats. (He is unlikely to lose his position because of this flap; his presence is useful electorally.) William Kristol invoked our Eleventh Commandment that political differences over foreign policy stop at the water's edge (has he heard of the Internet?)—the usual ploy to thwart debate. Kristol called Steele's remarks an “affront” to the Republican Party and to our “commitment to our soldiers.”

Sen. McCain and his cohorts metaphorically grabbed the microphone and assailed Steele because he undermined and assaulted the basic imperial behavior of the past six decades. Sen. Lindsay Graham, McCain's faithful sidekick, said, “This is not President Obama's war, this is America's war.” But Steele may have been playing good politics. The Afghanistan war is increasingly unpopular, even though for now his critique has not gained traction.

Sadly, there is little debate over the war in Afghanistan, as there is little about foreign policy generally. Steele confronted a longstanding consensus that supports our imperial expansion—again, supported by real and imagined security interests, magnified by economic considerations, not least of which is the health of our domestic “defense industry” enterprise. Our foreign policy course hardly arouses Congress, which has not raised any serious discussion since the Senate ratified the NATO treaty in 1949, or when Congress organized to cut off funding for the Vietnam conflict.

The Senate Armed Services Committee fulfilled McCain's prediction that Gen. David Petraeus would be quickly and unanimously confirmed as military commander in Afghanistan. Sen. Robert Byrd's death diminished the opposition, leaving few in the Senate with the will or courage to challenge U.S. policy in that war. As Petraeus took command of the “international” forces in Afghanistan, he declared that “we are in this to win.” Obama's promise to begin withdrawing troops in July 2011 may be politely ignored. We can be sure the general did not undertake this command to dismantle an American army. President Obama may look back nostalgically on the simplicity of sacking Gen. Stanley McChrystal.