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www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

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The Persistence of Empire

By David Bromwich

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THE resolution required to get out of an imperial or a humanitarian-improvement occupation is not different in kind from the heave of the will required for getting in. The problem is that getting in was made possible by a morale of entitlement that speaks the language of self-sacrifice and decency; this one-way bridge of excuses is still in place when the moment comes for getting out. If the choice to invade and occupy were actually derived from conscience, our duties might be revised once the mission was shown to be riddled with atrocities. Yet the occupying power will always be hampered by the emotion of conviction that drove it to attack in the first place.

A different bridge of excuses has sometimes proved serviceable. The majority of the people in the occupied country can be portrayed, often with a degree of truth, as victims of an active and energetic faction. The mission then comes to be seen as a salvage operation on behalf of the nonpolitical or the less political, the patient and long-suffering who mean no harm but are in danger of being engrossed by the appetites of dangerous and violent men. Violence, of course, is the method of the invading as of the insurgent army. But in the minds of imperial leaders, imperial wars are fought in some measure for the sake of passive sufferers, who will find their freedom as soon as the wicked have been purged—in a year, a decade, or longer.

The public understanding that control of the occupied country is somehow unselfish goes a long way to legitimate staying on. By contrast, empires that actually profess their selfishness are rare. The Belgian interest in the Congo represents an extreme and not an ordinary case; and the hatefulness of such adventurism sets a natural term to its efficacy. Most people, most nations, love themselves more than that. We love the idea that we are good; that we have and practice the best way of life. (The Roman Empire held the latter belief with so unmixed a fervor that its armies could maintain its colonies in subjection without the slightest pang of remorse. The best and luckiest of the colonized might always become Romans.) Self-love feeds on and builds up amour-propre—the sense that we are showing a good face to the world. Hence, imperial conquest naturally mingles high reasons with base motives. For the

occupying power, to have gotten in, and to have suffered losses in a foreign place, deepens the tracks of collective self-love to such an extent that no counteraction can be expected from self-reproach.

Only nations that (A) were defeated beyond the ability to pretend otherwise, and (B) had the luck to be well-treated by the power that vanquished them, may later exemplify the judgments of collective conscience. Germans of the last two generations have been thoughtful about the uses of national power in a way that Americans after Vietnam have not been thoughtful. Indeed, the *Dolchstosslegende* of “how we lost Vietnam” was freely invoked as recently as the last American presidential election. Among the guilty who are only half defeated, the very idea of national conscience is an oxymoron.

When conquest and occupation turn into a customary practice for a people not congenitally cruel—and let us agree the English-speaking peoples (as Churchill called us) are not raised to be cruel—the first effects of conquest will be registered in a mood of ecstatic wonder. This mood cannot be coaxed into retraction or reform without an intervening stage of bewilderment caused by setbacks. In British India, after Robert Clive’s victory at Plassey in 1757, the transition from imperial triumph to the first glimmers of reform took twenty-five years. In Iraq, violence contracted the necessary span to three or four. This second stage is characterized by doubts that have not yet crystallized into thoughts. The occupying power reflects on itself, with perplexity, as a natural ruler beset by resistance whose motives are unimaginable. (To call the resistance simply evil is to restate in other words this default of imagination.)

It is customary for setbacks to be followed by the adoption of a new pattern of cruelty—“taking the gloves off”—by the conqueror who now runs prisons and courts while retaining the power to despoil crops and devastate cities. In India in the 1770s, the governor-general of Bengal, Warren Hastings, explained to his superiors that Hindus and Mohammedans alike had been accustomed to a regime of oriental despotism; consequently, the light hand of British commercial rule was inappropriate: their disobedience called for exemplary punishments to drive the lesson home. A parallel system of explanations was deployed by the State Department under Condoleezza Rice. The reconstruction of civil society in Iraq was a harder job than we had envisaged. Why? Because, when the U.S. army rolled in, we discovered that Saddam Hussein, by a design three decades in execution, had destroyed every remnant of the civil society of Iraq, and had infantilized its people to the point where any hope of unassisted self-government was forlorn. There was no civil society there; we had to lift it in. On the other hand, the assassinations of 2003-2005, which robbed Iraq of many hundreds, perhaps thousands, of the teachers, doctors, lawyers, city administrators, and engineers who form the backbone of civil society—these killings (undeterred by U.S. troops) played no part in the official account of Iraq’s inward failure. Just so, the depredations of the Rohilla and Maratha wars of the 1770s and early 1780s, paid for or fought by the East India Company, played no part in the British account of the innate corruption and unfitness-to-rule of Indians of every sect and region. The incidental atrocities of those tribal wars, according to the governor-general, were “justified by the practice of war established among all nations of the East.”

Behind the pressure of self-justification, there is always a denial of perception, and behind that denial a failure of feeling. When once a country has embarked on a foreign war in which

self-preservation is a distant and incredible pretext, the ethic of “team spirit” supports the enterprise by infecting a reliable majority in the home country. As the Boer War attests, this spirit touches journalists as surely as lawmakers and soldiers. J.A. Hobson, in *The Psychology of Jingoism*, spoke of the characteristic means by which a war of choice is sold as a war of necessity:

Dishonesty, in the sense of professing to believe what one does not really believe, is very rare at all times; in this matter it may be safely regarded as undeserving of consideration. Those who profess to believe the war to be just and necessary do honestly believe this. But have they honestly come by this belief? That is the real question. Have they used such reasonable care in unbiassed consideration of the evidence as entitles them to claim an honest judgment?...The editors of Jingo journals have felt quite safe in continuing to repeat the most audacious falsehoods long after they have been exposed, simply because they knew that their readers, though perfectly aware that journals existed which gave another side, would not look at papers which opposed the war. Now, this attitude of mind has been the rule, and not the exception, among the classes which boast their education and intelligence, and it is an attitude of dishonesty.

Hobson knew South Africa firsthand, and he knew the interests from Cape Town to London that had pressed for the Boer War. The distinction he mentions, between active dishonesty and “an attitude of dishonesty,” applies to the American press and television at every stage of the Iraq War: from the credulous channeling of government evidence to rally popular feeling, to the celebrations of easy triumph, to the baffled non-political coverage of the insurgency, to the ready embrace of “the surge,” whose success in a five-month trial was reckoned sufficient to take the war off the front pages of our leading papers for most of 2007-2008. A reporter, whether at the State Department or in the streets of Baghdad, may tell “the truth and nothing but the truth” without coming near the whole truth. To recount the good intentions of army officers and not to investigate stories of atrocity involves a habit of self-censorship so commonplace it can pass for the mere economy of editing. With the denial of perception and the consequent shrinking of sympathy, only our own dead or those of our pledged allies are countable. The others are seen as possibly enemies, and probably hostile in some fashion.

Team spirit introduces another distortion that is harder to grasp because it is universal. People in the home country lose the ability to see the strangeness of their presence in a land several thousand miles away. How difficult it was, and is, for us to look at footage of American soldiers in Vietnam, or at photographs of our soldiers in Iraq, and continue to ask, year after year, “What are we doing there?” The apparatus of opinion, in which heroic stories of sacrifice exert a considerable popular influence, puts the very question out of mind. The strangeness is gradually rendered normal.

We may think we understand the British “Empire in the West” (the American colonies) and

the “Empire in the East” (the Indian subcontinent) because there is a received version that commands recognition. The mother country intended a generous partnership with her colonies, but the Americans, embodying “the dissidence of dissent, and the protestantism of the protestant religion,” were too heated with radical doctrine to be amenable to normal diplomacy. Whereas, with India, the empire found itself in the advance guard of civilization confronting a race in its nonage. As Sir John Seeley wrote in 1883 (mainly thinking of India), Britain seemed “to have conquered and peopled the world in a fit of absence of mind.” Yet the British Empire held a conscious ideology whose traces are legible from Macaulay’s “Minute on Education” to Kipling’s Barrack-Room Ballads. The American ideology of conquest has left thinner traces; few of those who governed our possessions have had the gift or the ambition to compose an enduring record.

Still, there has been a consistent ideology. In the years before the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln remarked the rise of what he called “pro-slavery theology.” God had not found a way into Southern justifications of slavery until the 1840s; but as the sectional conflict heated up, theology was called on to supply the answers that convenience and accident had given before. It has been the same, in our own time, with pro-empire geography. Apologists for the Iraq War decided in 2004-2005 that, though the war may have been a mistake, it was not our mistake. Iraq was never meant to be one country. The amalgamation of Shiite and Sunni and Kurdish regions, carved up and combined by the British in the 1920s, had never been built to last. Iraq, it was now discovered, would have been happier if left in three separate parts: this was the burden of an op-ed by Leslie Gelb and Joseph Biden, “Unity through Autonomy in Iraq,” published by the *New York Times* on May 1, 2006. A divided Iraq would make it easier for the autonomous divisions to get along (and perhaps also easier, though Gelb and Biden omitted to say so, for American forces to dominate). This rationalization was also a late discovery of the British in India, indeed a discovery announced by Seeley in *The Expansion of England*: “The truth is that [before the British came] there was no India in the political, and scarcely in any other, sense. The word was a geographical expression, and therefore India was easily conquered, just as Italy and Germany fell an easy prey to Napoleon.” Seeley went on to challenge the assumption that “wherever, inside or outside of Europe, there is a country which has a name, there must be a nationality answering to it.” Does the lack of a single coherent nationality make a country more proper for conquest or only more susceptible to it? The answer will depend on the extent to which one believes that human status is rightly constituted by national identity.

The most vexing puzzle of pro-empire geography, abetted by pro-nationalist theology, is that in the course of imperial wars the conquering power transforms the people of displaced nations into stateless persons; so that the conquered and displaced now lack precisely the political and legal rights that are more important to human survival than national identity itself.

The justifications of empire never run out. Suppose it is discovered that the conquered nation was actually composed of a number of smaller discrete nations, tribes, or sects. Nonetheless, these smaller units remain a legitimate object for external control and reshaping, since they pose a common problem both for the occupying power and for each other. Radical Islam today is said to present a challenge for the entire world, yet it is also a provocation that the United States has a duty to “engage with” militarily. We are the most militarized country in the world and “What’s the point,” as Madeleine Albright said to Colin Powell, “of having this

superb military you're always talking about if we can never use it?" So we take the responsibility on behalf of the world for dealing with Radical Islam. Yet the casualties we strew in our path are seldom the targets we aim at. Most of the hundreds of thousands killed by the United States thus far in Iraq and Afghanistan were never part of Radical Islam; and the killing contributes to swell the resentment and drive up the hatred to which Radical Islam can appeal.

That the United States bears the responsibility for maintaining right over wrong in the world, and that we ought to enforce our sense of responsibility by violence which may permissibly kill hundreds of thousands of the innocent—this doctrine presumes a degree of confidence in ourselves as judges in our own cause that, if we found it in a person, we would recognize as a form of insanity. Yet there are venerable pretexts for so expansive a notion of American altruism. One such pretext was inadvertently given by Lincoln, in a passage of his *Speech on the Dred Scott Decision* that has been admired alike by neoconservative and neoliberal pundits. Lincoln here said of the American founders' use of the words "All men are created equal":

They meant to set up a standard maxim for free society, which should be familiar to all, and revered by all; constantly looked to, constantly labored for, and even though never perfectly attained, constantly approximated, and thereby constantly spreading and deepening its influence, and augmenting the happiness and value of life to all people of all colors everywhere.

This is a subtle and complex metaphor about the influence of an ideal; and Lincoln meant to evoke a sublime civic achievement rightly admired from afar: a principle to be studied and emulated by a conscious act of the will. "Spreading and deepening" suggests a possibly related idea: a color penetrating a fabric whose extent grows imperceptibly wider. Yet, for the warmest enthusiasts of the expansion of freedom—the sort of lawmaker or journalist to whom Tony Blair could seem "the conscience of the free world"—Lincoln's idea of a principle that "spreads" suggested a more literal way of proceeding. Armies might invade the lands of the oppressed and convey a democratic idealism by force of arms.

It is extremely unlikely that Lincoln had this in mind. In his own time, he was hostile to the idealism of Manifest Destiny. He thought the Mexican War unjust, and made an eloquent speech against it. He also declined the gambit proposed by his secretary of state, William Seward, in March 1861, to work up a national freedom-war against Spain and France as a common enterprise to unify the American North and South. On the other hand, it seems possible that the sensibility of Woodrow Wilson vibrated to the call of generous empire that Lincoln's words could seem to present to a latter-day Democrat and Presbyterian elder. And if these particular words were never quoted by George W. Bush—as they were quoted by his father in 1990—yet the younger Bush paraphrased them often, and with an exalted glow. The idea of an exemplary democracy, which Lincoln intended, is slower to disclose its fruits than the evangelical democracy we have mistaken it for.

It is often said that in the era of globalization the nature of empire has changed. Since commercial and not political domination is what we seek, and since military means are now incidental, America's burdens today are as benign as they are irresistible. Once the world is joined to form a single polite and commercial people, the wars will be over. Yet the co-presence of commercial expansion and war is an older story than we Americans have been trained to recognize. On this point Seeley, because he was an honest defender of empire, makes a convincing antidote to Woodrow Wilson. "The wars of the eighteenth century," he observed,

were incomparably greater and more burdensome than those of the Middle Ages. Those of the seventeenth century were also great. These are precisely the centuries in which England grew more and more a commercial country. England indeed grew ever more warlike at that time as she grew ever more commercial.

America in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries has grown more warlike even as we are told that the age of globalization will soon render all wars obsolete. Once again, the resort to war has marched hand in hand with the spread of commerce.

Getting out is made onerous, above all, by the inhibitions of a natural pride. In Vietnam, it took the five years from 1964 to 1968 for even the liberal wing of the Democratic Party to say we ought to include the Vietcong in negotiations; and that war, as Frances FitzGerald recalls, with its adjustments and rising brutality and enhanced dishonesty under President Nixon, went on for another six years. At the end of any such engagement, there remain people in the occupied country who are attached to the occupying power. There remain a larger number, hard to discriminate from the first, who have shown visible loyalty and to whom the occupying power owes a reciprocal debt. These may yet be made into a reason for staying in Iraq, as they were made a reason for staying in Vietnam; the longer we stay, the more of them there are. Yet such loyal followers ought to be cared for as an addition to the duties of leave-taking, and not deployed as a fresh complication to throw doubt on the process. In any case, we cannot judge our actions against a future that is supposed to alter the pattern of the past. Sanely to judge our present state means to place, in one side of the scale, the actual weight of what we have done, and in the other side the things we ought to have done. When the balance of our past action tips far toward injustice, it is well beyond time to be getting out.

"No imperial power," Rajeev Bhargava observes of the British departure from India, "has been known to withdraw from a colony without securing its strategic interests"; for the "occupying power," he adds, "must appear, at the very least, to exit on its own terms." This is true of the not-wholly-defeated, for reasons of national amour-propre. But the words of Lord Chatham to Parliament on the occupation of America are still pertinent: "We shall be forced ultimately to retreat: let us retreat when we can, not when we must." Why, it may finally be asked, is there ever a "must" so long as the occupying power holds command of the field and so long as it can enforce its will as the greater power? An answer memorable in its plainness was given by the North Vietnamese commander General Vo Nguyen Giap. We will defeat

the Americans, said Giap, because we cannot leave this country. The Americans will leave because they can.