

BY ROBERT W. MERRY

# Rome on The Potomac

*Like it or not, America today finds itself an imperial power committed to maintaining an empire. The only question is what kind of empire?*

**I**t was around 88 B.C. when the king of Pontus—Mithridates VI, sometimes called Mithridates the Great—decided he had had enough of Roman influence in his region, of Roman meddling in his affairs, of the whole gamut of Roman arrogance and imperial pretensions. He vowed to destroy the Roman presence in the eastern lands that he felt should be his to dominate. He waited patiently until his western nemesis became preoccupied with a bitter civil conflict upon the Italian peninsula, and then he struck with a force and vengeance characteristic of cultural wars.

Mithridates of Pontus is removed from us by a couple thousand years of time, but the locus of his kingdom is removed from present-day Iraq by only a couple hundred miles of distance. And the story of Rome and Mithridates is worth pondering today as the story of America and the world of Islam unfolds. Americans today, judging by the public prints, seem preoccupied with the question of whether they stand at the threshold of empire. The subject has received cover treatment in one form or another in such diverse publications as *Time*, *Newsweek*, the *New York Times Magazine*, *Atlantic Monthly*, *National Journal*, *U.S. News & World Report*, *Foreign Affairs*, the *Weekly Standard*, and *Mother Jones*. What's more, these explorations make clear that the issue scrambles up the

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country's political fault lines in entirely new ways. Both the intellectual right and the intellectual left are split on the issue, while the vast political middle appears open but wary. Depending on how things go during the next few years, a major new political alignment could be in the offing.

In the meantime, post-9/11 events seem to be taking on a power of their own, impervious to the pronouncements and denunciations of public discourse. Indeed, with American might planted firmly upon the soil of the Muslim heartland, the American Empire may very well be at hand, with the only major question being: What will it bring—to the world and to America? Answers may lie in the antecedents of history, starting with Mithridates of Pontus.

#### BIG PLANS

He was a cagey and ruthless ruler, which he had to be to survive the intrigues and treacheries of court life in Asia Minor. He inherited his throne at age eleven but fled almost immediately to avoid being killed by his own mother. He lived in the wild as a hunter, “dressed in skins,” as Will Durant described it, and returned only when he was big enough and strong enough, at age eighteen, to depose his mother and have her

*Fearing poisoning by his enemies, Mithridates IV made an intensive study of poisons and antidotes, using both his prisoners and himself as test subjects. He developed a universal antidote, “Mithridatum,” which he took regularly. When the Romans finally caught up to Mithridates, he tried to commit suicide by poison, but—thanks perhaps to his antidote—it was ineffective, and he had to order one of his soldiers to stab him. Roman general Pompey then carried Mithridates’ antidote recipe back to Rome.*

killed. He subsequently slew his brother, three sons, and three daughters (or so the Roman historians tell us) to ensure his hold on power. And he developed a practice of ingesting small amounts of various poisons every day to build up immunity and thwart any would-be stealthy assassins among his intimates.

Mithridates harbored big plans for his kingdom, located in what is now Turkey, on the southeastern shores of what is now called the Black Sea, not far from what is now the Turkish-Iraqi border. With a mercenary army, he captured Cappadocia to the south, then conquered Armenia to the east, then stretched his sway around the eastern and northern shores of the Black Sea.

But his ambitions were not slaked because to his west lay Bithynia, and Bithynia controlled the Hellespont, linking the Black Sea to the Mediterranean—portal to vast and lucrative markets and a strategic leverage point in the region.

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He could crush Bithynia in a week's time and take that economic and strategic prize except for one thing: Rome. Bithynia was a Roman client state and thus untouchable. When he had marched into Bithynia a few years before to involve himself in a dynastic dispute there, Rome had ordered him out. After he complied, the Roman proconsul in the region, one Manius Aquilius, encouraged the new Bithynian ruler to invade the Pontic lands.

That was the last straw for this eastern potentate. As Durant puts it, "Mithridates felt that his sole chance of survival lay in arousing the Hellenic East to revolt against its Italian overlords." He expanded his army to nearly 300,000 men and took Bithynia. He built up a navy of four hundred

ships and destroyed the Roman presence in the Black Sea. He "liberated" Greece from Roman dominance. And then he unleashed a pogrom on Roman and Italian citizens throughout the region, slaughtering more than 80,000 and confiscating their property. As a demonstration of contempt, he poured molten gold down the throat of Manius Aquilius.

Of course this bloody development shocked Rome, which promptly set about sending an army to Asia Minor to thwart Mithridates' ambitions. But then things began to go awry as foreign policy imperatives disturbed old domestic political fault lines. The two greatest generals of the day—Gaius Marius, savior of the Republic against the Germans but now old and physically reduced; and the sly Lucius Cornelius Sulla, an earlier and grander version of Tony Soprano—each wanted to command the expeditionary force. Worse, each represented a major faction in the ongoing political struggle of the day—Marius, the populares, who wanted political power distributed more widely throughout society; and Sulla, the optimates, who wanted power held firmly in the hands of the old patrician families. As this persistent rivalry heated up and the factions became increasingly enraged, the tectonic plates under the surface of the Roman polity shifted dramatically. In the ensuing civil war, many precedents of the ancient republic were shattered: For the first time, a Roman army marched on Rome; for the first time, the six-month dictatorship allowed in the constitution to meet civic emergencies was usurped for an indefinite period; and at one point, a victorious faction unleashed a "proscription" upon its political enemies, marking them for death. And slowly the Roman republic,

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nearly four hundred years old and one of the greatest civic achievements in the history of mankind, ceased to be.

#### THE AWESOME THING

Nobody in our time and our country can envision our own republic descending into such internal chaos and violence. But foreign adventures tend to have unintended consequences both at home and abroad. And in recent months, as America built up its own expeditionary force and went to war in Mithridates' old neighborhood, the country found itself asking whether America was moving inexorably toward empire, in the tradition of Rome or Great Britain—and whether such imperial ambitions could affect the course of our domestic politics. “Why should a republic take on the risks of empire?” asked Michael Ignatieff of Harvard's Kennedy School of Government in a provocative *New York Times Magazine* piece entitled “American Empire (Get Used to It).” He added: “Won't it run a chance of endangering its identity as a free people?”

The Ignatieff piece, which he later described as “cautionary,” combines with numerous others to suggest there's a wide body of sentiment among thinking Americans that their country is indeed moving into an era of world hegemony that could legitimately be called imperialism. Asks Ignatieff, “What word but ‘empire’ describes the awesome thing that America is becoming?” He notes that America is the only nation that maintains five global military commands encompassing more than a million armed personnel on four continents; roams every ocean with major naval forces; guarantees the survival of client states around the world; assumes custodianship of global trade and commerce; and declares its dreams and desires to be universal for all peoples everywhere. Max Boot, former writer for the *Wall Street Journal* editorial page and now a fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, penned a piece in the *Financial Times* entitled “America's Destiny Is to Police the World.” In it he noted proudly, “Unfortunately, a cop's work is never done.”

Of course, President Bush and his minions all decry the term and disavow any intent toward empire. “We have

no territorial ambitions; we don't seek an empire,” said the president at Arlington National Cemetery on Veterans Day, echoing oft-repeated comments from himself and top aides. But some months later, in his State of the Union speech to Congress, he declared that “the course of this nation does not depend on the decisions of others.” He added, “The liberty we prize is not America's gift to the world, it is God's gift to humanity.” *Financial Times* columnist Philip Stephens, quoting those sentiments, added, “You have to go back a while to find such a stark assertion of moral certitude and strategic power.” He predicted a “geopolitical earthquake” when the world realizes that America's invasion of Iraq and subsequent occupation “will do more than redraw the region's strategic map. It will mark the moment when the U.S. takes upon itself...the role of the imperial power.”

#### INTENTIONS AWRY

And yet America as a nation certainly didn't go into the Middle East with any conscious thought of building or maintaining an empire. Notwithstanding all the discussion and debate, most Americans likely would embrace Bush's demurral and say we're simply attempting to foster democracy, peace, and stability around the world, hardly imperial designs in the tradition of past empires. But history tells us that empires of the past seldom set out to become empires as that word was understood at the time. Perhaps the Roman experience offers further enlightenment on the subject.

By 265 B.C., the Roman republic had established its dominance over the Italian peninsula, much as the United

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States consolidated its position on the American continent in the 19th century. At that time it was a land power with no significant navy and no serious ambitions beyond its peninsular boundaries. But when the expansive maritime power of Carthage began laying claim to the island of Sicily, the

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Sicilians appealed to Rome for help. After an intense internal debate, Rome plunged into the fray as protector of Sicily, much as America became the protector of Western Europe at the dawn of the Cold War. Besides, there was an underlying element of self-interest: Sicily provided most of Rome's grain supply, and it wouldn't be prudent to let that come under the sway of Carthage. But this new challenge required the creation of a large navy and land armies far greater than the city-state had ever before known. Thus, largely by default and through the imperatives of the time, Rome became a sea power and, to a much greater extent than ever before, a martial state. Soon it found itself in a bipolar world with two superpowers vying for position in the Mediterranean.

Nobody thought this state of affairs could last. Sooner or later either Rome or Carthage would have to prevail and gain dominance over the civilized world. "Carthage must be destroyed," declared Marcus Cato the Censor at the end of every Senate speech, on whatever topic, over a period of decades. And over nearly 120 years and three bitter wars the two superpowers struggled for primacy. Rome—superior in technology, manpower, and generalship—ultimately prevailed and destroyed Carthage as a viable civic entity. And so there stood Rome, the lone super-

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power, with a big standing navy and an efficient army and far-flung provinces that included Sicily and Sardinia, the African lands surrounding the now-destroyed Carthage, and the old Carthaginian principalities in Far and Nearer Spain. It was inevitable that along the way she would gain sway over Greece and the coastal lands of Asia Minor.

There was no grand design here—merely a great city-state, proud of its distinctive democratic heritage and superior ways, fulfilling its destiny and then consolidating and exercising the power it found in its possession. But

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maintaining all this territorial dominance required ongoing struggle and never-ending sacrifice of treasure and blood. There was the challenge posed by King Jugurtha and his Numidian kingdom west of the new Africa Province. There were the constant uprisings of Spain's fiery Celtiberians. There were the persistent maneuverings of Mithridates over in Asia Minor, which required three separate wars on far-away soil before the wily potentate was finally subdued. And there was always the prospect of completely unexpected challenges—such as the massive German invasion of Gaul around 104 B.C., which claimed 80,000 legionnaires in the battle of Arausio before Marius emerged to turn back the horde, and the Italian uprising of 92 B.C., which consumed the peninsula in three years of civil war. Historians have debated for centuries the question of whether these extensive imperial commitments and battles ultimately sapped the authority of Rome's republican structures and ushered in its subsequent "empire" period, with its long string of Caesars and bloody disputes over who would be the next one. Of course no definitive answer has been forthcoming, but we do know that the crisis of the regime that characterized the Roman republic in the last century of its four-century history coincided with the emergence of Rome's imperial impulse.

And we know that America at the Cold War's end found itself in much the same situation as Rome encountered upon its destruction of Carthage—a lone superpower capable of imposing hegemonic order upon a potentially chaotic world of vastly lesser states; a power with far-flung client states and military outposts supporting multitudinous commercial and diplomatic interests around the



**Andrew J. Bacevich** of Boston University: His book, *American Empire: The Realities and Consequences of U.S. Diplomacy*, is laced with insights that lay bare the underlying realities of our time.



world; a naval force without peer anywhere upon the sea; a power proud of its democratic institutions and distinctive heritage as a republic in which the idea of the state superseded the importance of any governing individual or faction; and a budding imperial entity that wrapped its muscular body of self-interest in a finely embroidered cloak of idealism and self-perceived virtue.

“Welcome to the post-post-cold-war world,” writes Martin Wolf in a provocative essay in the *Financial Times*. “The new world of U.S. primacy and aggressive unilateral action began with the terrorist outrage of September 11, 2001, and the war on Afghanistan. But the war on Mr. Hussein is about to turn these events into an epoch.” If it emerges, as it certainly appears in the process of doing, it will be the epoch of American Empire.

#### OPENNESS AND SELF-INTEREST

Probably no effort to explain all this matches a little book called *American Empire: The Realities and Consequences of U.S. Diplomacy*, by Andrew J. Bacevich, a soldier turned academic. Bacevich, who teaches at Boston University and directs its Center for International Relations, doesn’t avoid entirely a common flaw in this kind of critical analysis. A pungent critic of American policy in the post-Cold War era, he neglects to explain what policies he would have favored over those he criticizes. But his book, published by Harvard University Press, is laced with insights that lay bare the underlying realities of our time. Of all the recent writings purporting to explain how we got where we are, his may be the most probing and complete.

He posits three essential questions: What is the underlying geopolitical philosophy guiding American foreign policy today? Where did it come from? And what are its

implications and consequences? He calls the prevailing philosophy “global openness”—a drive, often called “globalization,” to remove barriers that inhibit the movement of goods, capital, ideas, and peoples across national borders. The ultimate goal, he says, is “an open and integrated international order based on the principles of democratic capitalism, with the United States as the ultimate guarantor of order and enforcer of norms.”

Although this philosophy is almost universally described by American leaders and policymakers in idealistic and benign terms, at its foundation lies the motivation of American self-interest. It isn’t simply that proponents of openness believe American security requires an open world friendly to liberal values, says Bacevich. They also believe that “an open world that adheres to the principles of free enterprise is a precondition

for continued American prosperity.” That’s because ongoing economic growth in America, and the wealth it fuels, is viewed as impossible without unfettered access to global markets.

This outlook certainly isn’t new. Think of Secretary of State John Hay’s “Open Door” policy at the turn of the last century, demanding access to Chinese markets for U.S. business. This was readily embraced by the American people, who saw a connection between this concept of openness and their own particular way of life. “Openness became a precondition of freedom and democracy. It implied stability and security,” writes Bacevich. “America’s own commitment to openness testified to its own benign intentions—and therefore justified American exertions on behalf of an open world.”

During the following century, this strain of thinking ribboned itself through the country’s foreign policy debates, rising or receding according to circumstances of the

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time. It dominated the rhetoric of Theodore Roosevelt at the dawn of the 20th century, guided Woodrow Wilson’s grand global ambitions at the time of World War I, then faded as America sought postwar “normalcy” during the 1920s and 1930s. It played a role, though probably not a dominant one, as America once again entered the global fray after Pearl Harbor and remained relatively dormant during the Cold War half-century of “containment.” Then it rose to



DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE PHOTO BY R.D. WARD

*U.S. Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz: The primary U.S. goal should focus on “convincing potential competitors that they need not aspire to a greater role or pursue a more aggressive posture to protect their legitimate interests.”*

hegemonic status among ideas in the post-Cold War environment.

Bacevich offers a startling insight when he debunks the commonly

held notion that the foreign policies of presidents George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton were based on incoherent flailings producing little more than a strategic void. In the emergent post-Cold War rhetoric he perceived “coded messages deeply rooted in American history”—namely, the orthodoxy of openness. “Linking American words to American actions,” he writes, “the key revealed a pattern and offered evidence of a coherent grand strategy conceived many decades earlier and now adapted to the circumstances of the post-Cold War era.”

#### THE PREMINENCE MANIFESTO

That adaptation emerged, however, over time and through trial and error, as evidenced by what Bacevich calls the “Wolfowitz indiscretion.” Named after Paul Wolfowitz, who served the first President Bush as undersecretary of defense for policy, this episode concerned a Pentagon position paper developed under his supervision and circulated in draft form in 1991 and 1992. It identified American preeminence as the premier geopolitical reality in the post-Cold War era and posited the notion that American foreign policy should be aimed at perpetuating that reality. Thus, the primary U.S. goal should focus on “convincing potential competitors that they need not aspire to a greater role or pursue a more aggressive posture to protect their legitimate interests.” America, said the paper, should “sufficiently account for the interests of the advanced industrial nations to discourage them from challenging our leadership or seeking to overturn the established political and economic order.” Further, the country should “maintain the mechanisms [read: power] for deterring potential competitors from even aspiring to a larger regional or global role.”

When this breathtaking manifesto inevitably was leaked to the press, critics rose up to attack such thinking as arrogant, foolhardy, and un-American. The language was promptly scrapped, substituted by the idiom of freedom, peace, and liberty.

But Wolfowitz returned in the second Bush administration as deputy defense secretary and is credited with being one of the architects of the war on Iraq and America’s far-reaching post-9/11 ambitions. And his outlook guided George W. Bush when he put forth his National Security Strategy document delivered to Congress last year. The document’s doctrine of preemption—America’s right to take action to protect itself from potential threats even before an attack against the United States—garnered the most attention and criticism. But its most aggressive assertion was the country’s expressed resolve to prevent potential adversaries from developing the military capacity to surpass or even equal the power of the United States—in other words, the revival of the Wolfowitz manifesto, now enshrined in presidential language.

America’s apparent march to empire in the post-Cold War era can be traced in its trek from a government forced to squelch the Wolfowitz formulation to one that embraced it. Although the trek includes a multitude of actions and words, it is seen most vividly in six big developments—the

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1991 Gulf War, Somalia, the Bosnia intervention, the Kosovo air campaign, the 9/11 terrorist attacks, and the Iraqi war.

After George H.W. Bush’s brilliant victory over Saddam Hussein in the Gulf War, the president proved himself ill-suited to the task of articulating just what that victory meant. He spoke vaguely of a “new world order” and mouthed platitudes about spreading democracy, but he nev-

er really explained what this new order was. Worse, he seemed incapable of grasping the full significance of the Soviet demise. In his famous “chicken Kiev” speech in mid-1991, he lectured the people of Ukraine on the virtues

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of their staying within the Soviet orbit, thus suggesting, as Bacevich puts it, “a preference for propping up the existing order even at the expense of denying the aspirations of peoples hitherto categorized as oppressed.”

But the world did get a stark message as it watched America send an expeditionary force of half a million soldiers half way around the world to protect status quo borders and the West’s access to abundant Middle Eastern oil. And many nations inevitably concluded there was added significance in America’s decision to leave 23,000 troops in the region for a decade after the Gulf victory. A new world had emerged, dominated by a lone superpower.

#### NO CASUALTIES

And yet it wasn’t quite clear just what it would take to trigger foreign action on the part of that lone superpower. Then an intriguing partial answer came in December 1992 when Bush, then a lame duck, sent 25,000 troops into the chaotic African nation of Somalia to establish sufficient stability so relief organizations could fight the rampant starvation besetting that hapless land. Bill Clinton, upon taking office, promptly embraced the mission and expanded it to include neutralizing some of the warlords who were creating the societal chaos. The significance of the Somalian adventure was that it was entirely a humanitar-

ian mission without any pretense of being even slightly related to American interests. Thus, when warlord militants ambushed a contingent of U.S. forces in Mogadishu, killing eighteen and wounding 75, the mission quickly collapsed. The soldiers were brought home, and Somalia was left to itself.

But this searing failure, writes Bacevich, stamped a number of geopolitical lessons upon the consciousness of Clinton administration policymakers: “Fight only in settings that play to American strengths [particularly avoid urban combat]. Keep a watchful eye on military leaders. Give the officer corps no cause to obstruct or complain. Above all, avoid casualties”—particularly in operations unrelated to vital national interests. These lessons in turn fostered what might be called the Clinton doctrine on the use of military force. Bacevich dubs it “gunboats and Gurkhas.” The latter-day gunboats were cruise missiles and precision-guided bombs dropped from high-altitude aircraft—instruments of death that carried little risk of U.S. casualties. The latter-day Gurkhas were allied armies placed in harm’s way to foster openness wherever possible—Australian forces in East Timor, for example, and troops from Nigeria, Ghana, and Senegal, trained by U.S. Special Forces and sent into the civic chaos of Sierra Leone. “The Clinton doctrine,” writes Bacevich, “bent the military to the imperatives of maintaining the momentum toward greater openness, enforcing the rules to which a globalized world ought to adhere, and fending off doubts regarding the U.S. claim to world leadership.” But the no-casualty rule remained paramount.

The Clinton doctrine guided strategy when the president unleashed air campaigns against Serbian nationals in the Bosnian civil war in 1995 and again during the Kosovo hostilities of 1999. The 1995 air assault was credited with inducing the desired result, a cessation of Serbian “ethnic cleansing” and a negotiated settlement. But another inducement was a punishing anti-Serb ground campaign by the Croat Army, trained by a private contractor made up of former U.S. military officers closely tied to the Pentagon. In other words, both gunboats and Gurkhas. Similarly, the brutal air assault on the Serbian military and capital in 1999, designed to force the Serbs to relinquish control of their ancestral homeland Kosovo, was accompanied by coordinated ground campaigns by the Muslim Kosovo Liberation Army. In both instances, the victors on the ground promptly unleashed ethnic-cleansing campaigns against the Serbs as America looked on passively.

The Clinton doctrine served as undergirding for an important new development in the post-Cold War era—a dramatic increase in the use of U.S. military force around the world. In the dozen or so years since the end of the Soviet

system, the United States has embarked on nearly fifty military interventions, as compared to only sixteen during the five decades of the Cold War. Bacevich suggests this constitutes the militarization of U.S. foreign policy. No one personified this development more starkly than Clinton's secretary of state, Madeleine Albright, who sought to debunk the so-called Powell doctrine espousing the use of troops only when the United States could muster overwhelming force in behalf of well-defined military objectives. Albright chided the author of this doctrine, General Colin Powell, with the question, "What's the point of having this superb military...if we can't use it?" Her aim, and that of other Clinton officials, was to use it readily "as a swift sword to set things right," as Bacevich puts it. But that didn't mean she favored war, as she was quick to explain. "We're talk-

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ing about using military force," she snapped at one point during a talk with university students, "but we are not talking about a war. I think that is an important distinction." That was the essence of the Clinton doctrine: no wars, but more and more military interventions.

This posed two problems. First, it wasn't clear whether the country could continue to influence events abroad indefinitely with such antiseptic military interventions studiously conceived to avoid the spilling of American blood. Eventually, some foreign leader was sure to call the Americans' bluff, and then ground troops would have to be introduced to forestall defeat. This nearly happened during the 1999 air campaign against Serbia, when that country's leader, Slobodan Milosevic, hunkered down and defied the Americans. That led to an expanded air campaign designed to inflict maximum damage on the Serb economy and maximum pain on the Serb people; in the end 85 percent of

Serbs found themselves without electrical power, and 500 innocent civilians were killed. Even so, Clinton was on the verge of approving a ground invasion before Milosevic, under pressure from his allies the Russians, finally gave in. "Having blundered into an open-ended conflict against an unpredictable, surprisingly defiant foe and with the future of NATO hanging in the balance," writes Bacevich, "the United States found itself face to face with the limitations of the Clinton doctrine."

#### THE VORTEX OF OPENNESS

The other problem was even more troublesome, if not widely understood at the time. The doctrine of openness was supposed to usher in a safer and more peaceful world, as more and more nations embraced the American model or, barring that, found themselves under increasing military pressure to do so. There was a dialectic of inevitability about it, as if the American model represented the culmination of human development through history and hence the forces of globalization were inexorable. And, since America is essentially a benign nation (so the reasoning went), as the world embraced our habits and systems the world would become more benign. But many nations around the globe didn't buy our notion of what constitutes the ideal political and economic system, and some bridled at the idea that America was going to remake the world in its image. Hence, says Bacevich, a paradox emerged: "To the extent that the United States was succeeding in creating an open world, one consequence was to make Americans less rather than more secure."

American leaders readily acknowledged as much. "The very openness of our borders and technology," said Bill Clinton, "also makes us vulnerable in new ways." Or, as Madeleine Albright put it, "Twenty-first-century threats know no boundaries." Thus did America inch its way toward a vicious cycle, with the drive toward global openness generating more danger for Americans, necessitating even greater military activity in behalf of openness, with the result being ever greater dangers.

Such was the situation when that contingent of Islamic fundamentalists jolted America with their nefarious attacks of September 11, 2001. The new president, George W. Bush, hadn't put forth much of a comprehensive foreign policy philosophy up to that time, although he had criticized Clinton during the campaign for his penchant for "nation building"—a hint that he himself wasn't so inclined to try to remake other nations in the American image. But at the time of the attacks there were essentially three strains of foreign policy thinking within his administration and among its friends. The first group might be called the pragmatists, personified by Secretary of State

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Powell, who has manifested concerns about the country getting militarily overextended and argues for observing diplomatic protocols to the fullest extent possible, even as we prepare for war. Next are the nationalists, personified by Vice President Dick Cheney and Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, who believe in the projection of American power to protect American interests and maintain global stability, but are wary of overblown notions about transforming the world in America's image. And then there are the so-called "neocons" (for neoconservative), who seem bent on leveraging the 9/11 events in furtherance of a grand global vision of American dominance and relentless force in behalf of American values. Inside the Bush administration, this view is personified by Wolfowitz and Douglas Feith, undersecretary of defense for policy; leading external exponents include William Kristol, editor of the *Weekly Standard* magazine, and Richard Perle, former chairman of a Pentagon advisory group called the Defense Policy Board. In a *Financial Times* piece by Stephen Fidler and Gerard Baker, a Brookings Institution fellow named Ivo Daalder was quoted as characterizing the neocons as "democratic imperialists."

In the wake of 9/11, the lines separating these three strains of thinking seemed to become blurred, and the neocons appeared ascendant. As Bacevich points out, Bush rose to the occasion with a response that went far beyond any need to retaliate against mass murder perpetrated on American soil. "Freedom itself is under attack," he declared and vowed to press ahead in behalf of freedom wherever it was threatened. He purported to speak for "the civilized world" and against a terrorist network bent on "remaking the world—and imposing its radical beliefs on people everywhere." In short, writes Bacevich, 9/11 gave Bush something that no other president could claim in the post-Cold War era: "a compelling rationale for a sustained and proactive use of American power on a global scale justified as a necessary protective measure."

It can be predicted that the national debate over "nation building" will become moot as the country finds itself struggling merely to pacify Iraq in the months and (probably) years ahead. Internal disputes about remaking the world in America's image will fade as we confront the chaos that likely will ensue in numerous Islamic nations in the wake of the Iraq invasion and the occupation that it will compel. And as the incidence of terrorism accelerates, as it surely will, the country will find itself drawn ever deeper into the vortex of global challenge and conflict. Perhaps a day will come when a realization will seep into the national consciousness that the whole concept of openness or globalization was based on a false premise—that American democracy represented the culmination of human development through history and that as other nations embraced this hallowed paradigm, as they surely would, the spheroid we inhabit would perforce become safer and more peaceful, less contentious and less bloody. At some point it will become clear to most that that was simply wrong.

But by then it might be too late because we could find ourselves holding the global tiger by its tail. Bacevich posits the view that the question facing America today is not whether we have become an imperial power. That question has been answered. "Like it or not," he writes, "America today is Rome, committed irreversibly to the maintenance and, where feasible, expansion of an empire that differs from every other empire in history." He says that the fundamental question rather is just what kind of empire Americans want theirs to be.

Whatever the answer, the country will be well advised to keep a weather eye out for the likes of King Mithridates of Pontus, for his ilk looms large in the future of our nation, which has survived more than two hundred years as a remarkable republic—about half the time span of the Roman republic before it faded amid the demands of global power and was replaced by a less free, less open, less democratic form of government. ◆