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To be or not to be: the United States as an Empire

Ser ou não ser: os Estados Unidos como Império

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Abstract

In the modern sense, the notion of "empire" can be understood not as a political unit but as a system of relationships that may or may not be pursued as a strategy by powerful states. Hence, in order to establish an imperial relationship, a state needs both power and will. Because the United States has been a relatively powerful country for much of its history, the occasional adoption of imperial strategies must therefore be explained by variations in willingness. This article maintains that this willingness was clearly present in at least three moments in U.S. history: after the Spanish-American War, after World War II, and after 9-11. In each of these cases, the United States faced strong reactions to its imperial strategy – symbolized, respectively by the Philippines, Vietnam, and Iraq – that ended up leading to its subsequent reevaluation.

Key-words: Empire. United States. September 11, 2001.

Resumo

Modernamente, a ideia de "império" pode ser entendida não como uma unidade política, mas como um sistema de relacionamento que pode ou não ser perseguido como estratégia por parte de Estados poderosos. Dessa forma, para estabelecer uma relação de tipo imperial um Estado precisa tanto de poder como de vontade. Visto que os Estados Unidos tem sido um país relativamente poderoso durante toda sua história, a eventual adoção de estratégias imperiais deve, portanto, ser explicada por variações em vontade. Esse artigo argumenta que essa vontade esteve claramente presente em pelo menos três momentos da história dos Estados Unidos: depois da Guerra Hispano-Americana, depois da Segunda Guerra Mundial, e depois do 11 de setembro de 2001. Em cada um desses casos, os Estados Unidos enfrentou uma forte reação à sua estratégia imperial – simbolizada respectivamente pelas Filipinas, Vietnã, e Iraque – que acabou levando a sua subsequente reavaliação.

Palavras-chave: Império. Estados Unidos. 11 de setembro de 2001.

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Introduction

Such as any other nation that achieved great power status, the United States has often been referred to as an empire. However, this term puts forth so many negative connotations that a number of scholars prefer to avoid using it altogether. In fact, "empire" is one of those terms in the social sciences that have acquired emotional undertones, and, as such, it has inevitably lost some of its scientific purpose. The issue is especially controversial in the U.S. context since this was a country born as a reaction to an overseas empire and therefore with a strong anti-imperialistic rhetoric. The literature of the United States as an empire has plenty of debates on whether it is a good or a bad thing, whether the United States should repeal it or embrace it. Although these debates are important, they often do not fail to provide a useful and valuable neutral definition of empire. This is especially troublesome if one considers that the notion of empire can be significantly useful to explain some international relations phenomena.

In this article I deliberately avoid debating benefits or drawbacks of the empire. When referring to "empire" I do not mean a political unit, but a system of relationships that may or may not be pursued as a strategy by powerful states. In this sense, the question is not whether the United States *is* an empire or not, but whether it has pursued imperial solutions for specific problems or not. It is undeniable that U.S. is a power, but the question that this article seeks to pose is when and how this power was clearly embodied in imperial strategies. I claim that the "how" is related to a factor that goes beyond the materialistic perception and includes an ideological component – the willingness to use imperial power in order to establish an imperial relationship. If an empire then requires power and will, and since the United States has been a very powerful country since, at least, the end of the nineteenth century, adopting imperial strategies could be explained by the changes in willingness. Based on a variety of interpretations, I will prove that this willingness was clearly present in at least three moments in U.S. history: after the Spanish-American War, after World War II, and after 9-11. In the first case, it was an entirely internal process that grew as the perception of U.S. power grew. In the second case, the willingness was developed from the outside, enticed by others as they perceived U.S. power to be so great that could be used in their interest. Finally, in the latter case, the willingness developed rapidly as a (over) reaction to being confronted by antagonist forces, in a moment when the United States enjoyed a unipolar status in the international system. In each of the three cases, the United States faced strong reactions to its imperial strategy that led to its subsequent reevaluation.

Post 1898: Empire by choice

The Spanish-American War of 1898 could be regarded as the official milestone for the U.S. entrance in the great-power game. Before that, as Ernest May (1991, 3) makes it clear, "the United States was dealt with as a second-rate power". However, "by the early twentieth century", he adds, "some European statesmen looked upon America as a very formidable power indeed" (May 1991, 5). The Spanish-American War, thus, is usually considered by several authors to be the event that "dated American entry into the arena of world affairs" (Morgan 1965, ix).

As the United States was being born as a great power, it fatally had to discuss what kind of power in the world it was going to be. And it is during this time that the willingness for empire is most evident, especially on occasion of the debates surrounding the annexation of previous Spanish colonies. In having to decide what direction their country should take as a newly-born great-power, Americans often displayed a certain immaturity that is characteristic of rookies. Dwelling in a world of empires and having just defeated one important European empire, Americans had to decide what direction they would take as a great power themselves. Living in a country with vast resources gave Americans the choice of being a great power without necessarily having to acquire an empire. Nevertheless, the political solutions undertaken by American statesmen in the aftermath of the Spanish-American War, especially in the case of Cuba and, even more clearly, the Philippines, were typically imperial. The United States became, then, an empire by choice rather than by necessity.

As David Healy (1970, 11) points out, the world of the 1890s "was still a world of empires, and the British Empire was still by far the largest and most imposing. All the great powers, however, had colonial possessions and were eager for more; all over the world the United States now seemed the most important exception to the prevalence of national land-hunger". In this world of empires, it sounded just natural for U.S. policymakers to talk candidly about the notion of an American empire, since it was culturally acceptable back then. Healy remarks that the mindset of the 1890s was characterized by the belief in progress and evolution, which was based on the notion of white superiority – "the white man's burden". This was translated in a "dual mandate" where the civilized societies in the world "provided progress, and colonies provided raw materials" (Healy 1970, 17). Healy also highlights that colonies were acquired not only for economic purposes but it also meant strength and controlling strategic points. Since the United States was a country that had no pressing needs for raw materials outside its territory, it was the cultural and strategic argument that provided the strongest basis for behaving in imperial ways. In an 1898 article entitled "Isolation or Imperialism", John Procter, who was a close friend of Roosevelt, wrote that "it seems to be the fate of the black and yellow races to have their countries parceled out and administered by efficient races from the Temperate Zone". England was the example to be followed, and the result of American imperialism would be "the advance of the blessings of civilization over the world" (Welch 1972, 25). On the Philippines, Procter argued that "there shall arise a New Imperialism, replacing the waning Imperialism of Old Rome; an Imperialism destined to carry world-wide the principles of Anglo-Saxon peace and justice, liberty and law" (Welch 1972, 26). This distinction implies that while there was an "old imperialism" concerned with territorial aggrandizement, the "new imperialism" would be concerned with spreading Anglo-Saxon values to allegedly backward peoples. A similar argument was made by David J. Hill, who was Assistant Secretary of State during the McKinley and Roosevelt administrations, in an 1899 article entitled "The War and the Extension of Civilization". Hill rejects both the notions of "imperialism" and expansionism" and argues that "a more fitting term to designate the aims and achievements of the nation is, perhaps, the phrase 'the extension of civilization'" (Welch 1972, 70). While others emphasized the strategic imperative, they also had the civilizational argument at the back of their minds. In an article stressing the strategic importance of Hawaii, Captain Alfred Mahan defends that "it is imperative to take possession" of the island (Welch 1972, 44). And again,

England was to be the model of imperial policies. "How much poorer would the world have been", Mahan exclaims, "had Englishmen heeded the cautious hesitancy that now bids us reject every advance beyond our shore-lines!" (Welch 1972, 43). In a letter to Mahan, the then Secretary of the Navy Theodore Roosevelt agrees: "I need not to tell you that as regards to Hawaii I take your views absolutely [...] If I had my way we would annex those islands tomorrow" (Welch 1972, 98). Roosevelt went beyond praising the British Empire which brought "an incalculable gain for civilization" (Welch 1972, 118), to also praise the Russian and French empires. His conclusion is unequivocal: "Fundamentally, the cause of expansion is the cause of peace" (Welch 1972, 120). One important aspect that these debates unveiled is how inappropriate it is to resort to notions of economic imperialism to understand the use of empire as a political solution, particularly in the case of American statesmen. As Welch argues, "the expansion which they debated was not a vague economic imperialism but the expansion of American political sovereignty and territorial rule to noncontiguous, overseas territories" (Welch 1972, 4), Their arguments, as shown above, embraced several other motivations beyond merely economic factors.

Thus, even though Americans generally talked about resisting the idea of becoming a European-like imperial nation, the temptation was too great to be ignored. This was true not only at the decision-making level as shown above, but it was also popular with the general public. The easy victory achieved in the war with Spain made clear that the United States was a powerful country indeed, but beyond that, it created a public will for empire. For Lars Schoultz (1998, 78), during the final decades of the nineteenth century, "U.S. *citizens* slowly developed the desire to acquire an overseas empire" (emphasis added). Schoultz enlists as one explanation for the war with Spain the existence of a "public mood for a more aggressive U.S. foreign policy" (1998, 130). Max Boot (2002, 106) maintains that those who advocated a more constraint foreign policy "were swamped by a tidal wave of imperialist sentiment". May (1991, 7) argues that, with the widespread perception of a "rising might" in the 1890s, "grew an ebullient, almost reckless mood" that fueled an imperialist perspective. John Dobson (1988, 201) draws attention to the immature aspect of the newly-born great power. "In its first forays into the game of great-power diplomacy", he argues, "the United States often behaved like an adolescent: brash, bold, and impetuous". H. Wayne Morgan remarks that the United States went to war with Spain "in a holiday mood that reflected its ignorance of the realities of either combat or world responsibilities" (Morgan 1965, 65), and the immediate outcome of the war would obviously reinforce this mood.

Hence, the interesting aspect of singling out 1898 is the fact that during that period the public will for empire is clearly identified. Dobson (1988, 65), for example, shows a very cautious McKinley who was wary of going to war even after the accidental destruction of the warship Maine had been blamed on Spain. He highlights that "the public concluded that Spain had been directly or indirectly to blame, and the public demanded a suitable punishment". Dobson (1988, 63) demonstrates that as late as March of 1898, a month before war was declared, "McKinley still hoped the suffering in Cuba could be ended without resorting to war", but the public and congressional pressures eventually convinced him "that the United States was going to war, with or without him, and he preferred to keep his credibility as a leader" (Dobson 1988, 65). "The Americans wanted war", concludes Dobson (1988, 70), "and McKinley let them have it".

Morgan (1965) disagrees on the question of McKinley cautiousness but consents on the degree of popular demand for empire. For Morgan (1965, x), acquiring Hawaii, the Philippines, and other territory were "part of a deliberate program for extending American power into the international politics and trade arena, and not by accident or default". As regards the public mood, the author mentions a poll of late 1890s showing that forty-three percent of newspapers favored the idea that he United States should be an empire, only a third opposed to it, and the remaining were undecided. For Morgan (1965, 14), however, it was not the "yellow press" who supported the American empire, but "it merely fed a public opinion that already existed".

Obviously, not everyone was so sanguine about the prospects of empire. The fact is that it is not so much that there was no opposition to empire, but that its supporters were far more popular. As Morgan (1965, 88) points out, "anti-expansionists in the [Republican] party admitted they were unpopular". In a book analyzing the anti-imperialist movement in the United States between 1898 and 1900, Robert Beisner (1992, 228) concludes that their failure "came partly because it was not possible to make Americans ashamed of themselves and afraid of the future at a time when they were enjoying fresh breezes of prosperity, glory, and optimism after more than a decade of depression and social strife. The anti-imperialists had run headlong into the fact that nothing succeeds like success. Thus, they were unable to prevent the acquisition of an empire".

The critical moment of the American empire during this period was definitively the question of the Philippines. Contrary to the arrangement made for Cuba through the Platt Amendment, which restricted Cuban sovereignty but retained some aspects of its independence, the solution for the Philippines was outright imperial – it was transformed in a de facto U.S. colony. If there could be geographic and political justifications for the cases of Cuba and Hawaii, "acquisition of the Philippines would represent colonialism, naked and shameless" (Welch 1972, 56). Moreover, while the idea of annexing Cuba or Hawaii had existed even before 1898, "prior to the war with Spain, no one in the United States even thought of acquiring the Philippines" (Healy 1970, 56). The question of the Philippines was, thus, an unexpected and unanticipated consequence of the war with Spain that suddenly left American statesmen to decide what to do with that piece of territory. The main concern was with other imperial powers – having defeated Spain, the McKinley administration reasoned that it would be imprudent to leave the Philippines to be conquered by another power. As Morgan (1965, 74) explains, "suspicions of foreign powers and their designs in the East intensified this emerging demand for empire [...] If America did not take the Philippines, they would, many reasoned". The McKinley administration was not entirely sure of what to do with the Philippines but he eventually decided to keep it because "no other attractive alternative ever emerged" (Dobson 1988, 104). Since he reasoned that he could not return them to Spain, not turn them over to another power, neither leave them to themselves because of, in his own words, their "native ignorance and inability to govern", he concluded that "there was nothing left for us to do but to take them all, and to educate the Filipinos, and uplift and civilize and Christianize them" (Morgan 1965, 96). The fact that the majority of the Filipinos were already Christian seems to have escaped McKinley.

The Philippines issue set a standard that accompanied other imperial ventures of the United States, that is, a pattern of initial optimism of American good intentions in bringing

order to dysfunctional societies, followed by frustration because of unexpected local resistance, which eventually culminates with a general bitter feeling that the United States should not get itself involved in the first place. As Dobson (1988, 107) points out, McKinley "presumed that the natives would be very happy to accept American aid and control" of the Philippines. The fierce resistance encountered in the Philippines led policy-makers and the public to rethink the wisdom of taking over that archipelago. "In less than a year" after 1898, Beisner (1992, xxii) observes, "a strong but largely self-contained America had changed into a far-flung empire already harassed by a colonial rebellion". The costs of fighting the Philippine insurrection was far greater that the cost of the war with Spain, especially as regards causalities. If the United States had lost a few hundred men in the Spanish-American War, it lost more than 4,000 putting down the Philippine insurrection (Dobson 1988). As a consequence, "the public's enthusiasm for conquest had deteriorated into frustration over expensive, time-consuming efforts at colonial consolidation" (Schoultz 1998, 191).

Thus, the effects of fighting the Filipino insurrection quickly obliterated the "ebullient mood" in the aftermath of the 1898 war. "Brief though it was", writes Dobson (1988, 209), "the Spanish-American War had so many complex disturbing consequences that it helped inoculate the United States against future, potentially much more costly, adventurism". The immediate effect, therefore, was a warier attitude towards the putative glamour of empire. In Morgan's (1965, 111) words, "[a]s American soldiers in that faraway land, prey to the terrors of climate, disease, and human enemy, fell before the machete and the bullet, some of empire's glitter faded". For Bernard Porter (2006, 71), fighting in the Philippines "was one of the things that made America stop in her tracks, and held her back from much more formal imperialism after the Spanish War". Beisner (1992, 226) argues that, as a result of the experience in the Philippines, the imperial urge "faded after 1900 as quickly as the anti-imperialist movement itself. By 1902, a close associate of Theodore Roosevelt [said that] the Philippines 'cost us a great deal of money; and any benefits which have resulted from it to this country, are, as yet, imperceptible to the naked eye'". Schoultz (1998, 192) observes that American citizens "were quietly coming to wonder about the wisdom of an expansionist foreign policy. The taste of empire was no longer in the mouths of the people". The public that had so vigorously supported a more aggressive foreign policy suddenly disappeared leaving policy-makers "alone to raise the children of their adolescent indiscretion" (Schoultz 1998, 192). In striking opposition to the mood a few years earlier, by the time of World War I, "anything smacking of 'imperialism' was in bad odor with enlightened opinion" (Boot 2002, 231).

The pattern was set. Initial great designs eventually would give way to commonplace unembellished facts. The grandiose idea of civilizing mission would be translated into the less charming reality on the ground of building roads and schools. The glamorous phase of military conquest would be quickly replaced by the dirty stage of guerrilla warfare. Public approval would obviously behave accordingly, but presidents, caught by events and having to deal with situations produced by earlier decisions, had a narrower margin of maneuver. About one hundred years later, the United States would find itself in a strikingly similar situation.

Post 1945: Empire by invitation

While in 1898 the United States and the world acknowledged American power, by 1945, having gone through several imperial experiences in the Philippines and in the Caribbean, the United States was a far more mature power. This time, U.S. statesmen were far less sanguine about the possibilities of using their great power to imperial ventures. Having reached maturity, the United States would not act based on a reckless mood. But the situation in Europe did not leave the U.S. with many choices and the country was actually invited to play a more active role, thus constituting, in Geir Lundestad's (1990) words, an "empire by invitation". At the same time the United States reached maturity as a great power, it became a global power.

The belief that the United States built an empire by invitation during the Cold War was developed by Lundestad, but it was already present in previous works. Amaury De Riencourt (1968), for example, argues that with Europe broke after World War II, the United States proceeded to establish an empire beginning with Greece and Turkey. "The essence of the Marshall Plan", argues De Riencourt (1968, 86), "was that it was not a dictation of the United States to Europe, but an *invitation* to the Europeans to join together" (emphasis added). The same invitation that was made on the economic realm, was repeated at the security level. Again, as De Riencourt remarks (1968, 262), "it was not Washington that imposed the Atlantic Pact on more or less reluctant partners but the French Premier of the day, Henri Queuille, who, on February 25, 1949, made a desperate appeal for American protection". The "price tag" for American protection would be unifying Western Europe. As John Lewis Gaddis (1997) states, this aspect was the core difference between the American and the Soviet empires – while the first ~~was largely an empire by invit~~ation, the latter was basically an empire by imposition. George Liska (1967, 20) also makes this differentiation between what he calls a "predatory empire', one characterized by a "polity driven into expansion from within", and an empire "drawn into expansion by the more or less remote conflicts and ambitions of third states".

Therefore, in contrast with the deliberate choice made some fifty years earlier, now the United States was far more reluctant to resort to imperial solutions. But, truth was that the vacuum left in Europe would be filled either by one side or the other, and the Soviet alternative was too dangerous to be ignored. It was certainly not ignored by the West Europeans, who insistently claimed for American help. It was also not ignored by U.S. statesmen, who realized the country's new global responsibilities. Contrary to 1898, when the United States without properly having imperial power tried its hand on the imperial business in an "ebullient mood", now resorting to empire was a corollary of the inescapable reality of the international system. This important difference is vividly captured by Liska (1967, 113) when he suggests that "an exuberant policy of external interference and expansion which stemmed from a mood, can fade with the next mood swing; a policy of leadership for a power-to-be, rooted in a configuration of forces and pressures, however, can resist only with that configuration". And in this configuration, even if the United States did not have imperial ambitions, it would often resort to "imperial methods" (Steel 1970, 17). Again, this would not be an empire driven chiefly by economic motives, but it would actually constitute a kind of "welfare imperialism" (Steel 1970, 19) without any clear or immediate economic benefits. As Ronald Steel states (1970, 21), "in many of the

new states we performed the tasks of an imperial power without enjoying the economic or territorial advantages of empire".

Thus, even if sometimes reluctantly, the United States saw itself in the mid-twentieth century building an empire of proportions unimagined at the beginning of that century. This time it was to be a global empire different than any other in modern history. As Lundestad (1990) points out, it was both different than the British empire before it, and from the Soviet empire. Compared to the latter, it was global, not regional. Compared to Britain, which extended largely to peripheral countries, it contained much more important units – Britain, Western Europe with most of Germany, and Japan. It was probably in this latter country that the imperial aspect was most evident, since "Japan's defense became an American responsibility and Japan's foreign policy to a large extent an extension of Washington's" (Lundestad 1990, 49). Lundestad (1990, 59) remarks that the invitation was also made outside these core areas, in places such as Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Iran, South Korea, Greece, Turkey, and South Vietnam. Even in Latin America, there was some complaint "that the United States was taking too little interest in their affairs". All these areas issued some kind or another of invitations, "all of them ultimately with success, despite a certain initial aloofness on Washington's part, at least on the nature of the proposed guarantees" (Lundestad 1990, 60). But the key area and prime example of the invitation aspect was certainly Western Europe. Lundestad (1990) regards the Marshall Plan as the "economic invitation" from Western Europe, which was made as a consequence of the harsh conditions in post-war Europe, and that was followed by a "military invitation" made as a consequence of an increasingly perceived threat from the Soviet Union. The author demonstrates how hard the Europeans worked to guarantee U.S. defense of the continent, and to make this guarantee as strong and automatic as possible, and how Washington, even though it did not do anything explicitly against its will, pushed to moderate the extension of its military involvement in Europe. For example, both Truman and Eisenhower liked to stress that the United States was in Europe on a "temporary or emergency basis" (Lundestad 1990, 76).

Taking a somewhat similar approach to Lundestad, Niall Ferguson (2004, 73) observes that the United States had no clear and well defined policies for the occupation of Japan and West Germany. Especially in the latter case, policies were developed on the go and a "reverse power struggle" developed in which "State and War departments [...] sought to pass the buck to the other". General Lucius D. Clay, who was the military governor of the U.S. occupied zone of West Germany "could not wait to get rid of this unlooked-for responsibility". As a consequence, Ferguson argues that the U.S. occupation was far from the ideal. "What was planned did not happen. What happened was not planned. This was not so much an empire by invitation as an empire by improvisation", he claims. The major factor that kept the United States strongly committed to the rehabilitation of Germany and Japan, Ferguson remarks, was the "fear of a rival empire". Thus, by combating Soviet imperialism, Americans were able to provide a rationale for their own imperialism, which leads Ferguson (2004, 78) to label containment as "the imperialism of anti-imperialism". This same line of reasoning was also made by other authors, such as Steel (1970, 16), who observed that "struggling against communism, we created a counter-empire of anti-communism".

This rationale of a counter-empire to battle against communism, embodied in the policy of containment, would be responsible for leading to an imperial policy that generated a strong reaction in the American empire's periphery. Again, as in the case of the Philippines, which were not on the American radar before the Spanish-American War, yet, suddenly became a central issue, another peripheral country would determine the course of American imperial temptation. As Lundestad (1990, 65) acknowledges, "the emphasis in 'empire' by invitation and on local support for the American role should not be taken too far" and in some regions armed force had to be used, even when no invitation was issued. And if Western Europe is the prime illustration of the notion of "empire by invitation", Vietnam became the opposite. If there was any invitation to the United States in Vietnam, it was not so much from the indigenous population but from the declining French empire. As in the case of the Philippines, the experience of Vietnam represented a change in the course and, not least significant, a change in the mood of American imperial career. As a matter of fact, Lundestad (1990) dates the early 1960s, when U.S. involvement in Vietnam began to increase as the beginning of the period of "decline" of the American empire.

Writing before the major escalation of the war, Liska (1967, 4) characterized the Vietnam war as "the first imperial war of the United States, fought at the remote frontier of empire [...] dictated by the concern for upholding minimum world order globally while raising issues of virtually direct rule locally and of the implications of a peripheral police action nationally". Some years later, when the outcome of the war was clear, Steel (1971, 16) would label Vietnam as "the bitter morning after". If the United States had gone to the Philippines some years earlier embodied in a spirit of new found might, it went to Vietnam also in a similar climate of "euphoria of power, generated in part by our success in the Cuban missile crisis and our military superiority over the Russians" (Steel 1971, 423). Yet, the model set by the Filipino insurrection, which is largely ignored by the analysts of the Cold War period, including Steel, would again repeat itself. The significant difference now was that the United States was a true global power with global responsibilities, in an era of increasing importance of the mass media. This time, the effects of fighting a local insurrection would have consequences not only for policy-makers and the general public mindset in the United States itself, but also for the newly born global audience. Thus, the "great tragedy" of Vietnam is not only, "the erosion of the belief by the American people in the virtue of their cause" (Steel 1971, 371) for this had already happened in some measure at the dawn of the century. The problem now was that this erosion occurred in a global, and not just a domestic scale. The effects were particularly relevant in the core of the American empire, when the war became a catalyst for changing the relationship with Europe. Writing when the Vietnam War was still unfolding, Steel (1971, 158) argued that "in no case would a unified Europe tolerate the continuation of the present situation [military dependence on US] in which it can automatically become involved in a major war as a result of some unilateral American action in a place like Vietnam". In fact, Lundestad (1990, 91) sees the Vietnam War as marking the beginning of the decline of the American empire, as it "changed both America's self-image and the world's image of the US".

But Vietnam was not the Philippines. It was worse. It is true that both had the effect of showing the limits not only of American power, but of American likeability. It is also true that both had important political and psychological impacts in the United States, and created a

certain "disillusionment and aversion to new commitments" (Lundestad 1990, 94). But contrary to the Philippines, Vietnam was a resounding defeat. Not only that, it was "the most significant American defeat" (Lundestad 1990, 94). Its psychological effects, according to Lundestad (1990, 112), "were in many respects similar to those the Boer War had on the British and, one might guess, Afghanistan had on the Soviets". If one observed what happened to the British and Soviet empires after the Boer and Afghan wars, the prospects for the American empire after the Vietnam War could be regarded as equally gloomy. The difference though, was that the Boer and Afghan War happened precisely when Great Britain's and Soviet Union's economic decline, while the United States showed a more robust, even if shaken, economy. However, in fact, the Vietnam War, as the Filipino War, made Americans realize once more the costs of empire. It would take forty years and a tragedy at home for the United States to adventure itself in an imperial undertaking of similar proportions.

Post 2001: Empire by provocation

As in the pre-1945 period, before September of 2001, the United States seemed wary of using too much of its power in the world at large. At the beginning of the new millennium, Americans seemed so comfortable in their role of Cold War winners that a foreign policy could be looked upon as an often dispensable luxury. During the 1990s, it was "the economy, stupid", and the following decade began with the promise of a "humble" foreign policy. Enjoying perhaps the greatest power ever acquired by any nation in the modern era, both in absolute and in relative terms, U.S. statesmen seemed content not to overuse it, despite occasional cries of interventionism. An adolescent power in the 1890s, reaching maturity in the 1940s, the United States resembled now an elderly power willing to enjoy retirement. The events of September 2001 however, forced the United States to resort once again to imperial solutions. But, as an elderly power, it would now display some signs of senility.

Similarly to Truman's and Eisenhower's stance on U.S. troops in Europe, it should be highlighted that, initially, it was not the U.S. intention to stay in Iraq for a long time, but the threat that was originally made in 2001, loomed even after the U.S. invasion of Iraq. Since the very beginning of the occupation in Iraq the Bush administration sought to assure that U.S. forces would remain in that country only for a brief period. President Bush assured in the beginning of 2003 that the United States would stay there "not a day more" than necessary. Other officials gave similar declarations estimating the duration of U.S. occupation between ninety days and six months (Ferguson 2004). These kinds of statements led Ferguson (2004, 203) to conclude by 2004 that the only thing clear about U.S. occupation in Iraq was that "it will be short". There are no reasons to doubt that the Bush administration did not want a long occupation, and that it intended to leave after elections were held.

The aftermath of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 in general and the invasion of Iraq in particular, vividly reignited the debates of an American empire. In 2004, for example, Steel (2004) reviewed thirteen books released after 9-11 that dealt with the issue of empire. He remarked that the United States was "in the first stages of imperial self-recognition" (2004, 29). This refreshed interest in the notion of an American empire led to all sorts of interpretation and a

corresponding renewed interest in the history of Roman and British empires in particular. Many, like Chalmers Johnson (2006), argued that the attacks of September 11 were just a payback for America's imperial actions in the past – U.S. actions abroad would eventually lead to disaster at home, they reason. For Johnson, the U.S. has been acting in imperial ways for a long time, but in a recent book he states that George W. Bush Administration was inherently evil – an empire that tortures, destroys ancient civilizations, and builds "imperial enclaves" with "swaggering soldiers who brawl and sometimes rape" women in the target countries (Johnson 2006, 278). U. S. military bases abroad are labeled as the "American version of colony" (Johnson 2006, 138). For Johnson, who is also critical of the British Empire, this imperial path will inevitably lead to the destruction of the American Republic and the establishment of a tyranny. Johnson argues that the fundamental choice of empires is between empire and democracy. He affirms that while Rome chose the first and lost the latter, Britain chose to maintain the latter and lost the first. Likewise, the United States faces the same choice, Johnson states. Jim Garrison (2004, 5) contends that this choice has already been made. For the author, after 9-11 the United States has crossed the threshold and "has made the transition from republic to empire" with "no turning back". Garrison (2004, 9) argues that the United States should see itself as a "transitional empire, one whose destiny at this moment is to act as mid-wife to a democratically governed global system" and eventually become the "final empire".

Similarly to Johnson, but in a less anguished tone, Andrew Bacevich (2002) defends that the United States has been pursuing a consistent imperial strategy since the beginning of the Cold War. This foreign policy is based on what Bacevich calls a "strategy of openness" aiming to create an open and integrated world dominated by the United States, and using force when necessary to "quell resistance" to this project. Under this perspective, even the end of the Cold War did not bring many changes to this underlying strategy – the difference is that it went from a defensive to an offensive one. Likewise, the aftermath of 9-11 is seen in this context as "a war to preserve and to advance the strategy of openness", now with less constraints (Bacevich 2002, 227). The author sees no major differences between the policies pursued by George H. W. Bush, Bill Clinton, and George W. Bush. Bacevich widely praises Williams Appleman's works. Williams who argued against the idea that the United States ended up pursuing an unintended imperial policy; instead, such as Williams, Bacevich sees this as a coherent and premeditated strategy of empire, diligently pursued by every American president since the end of World War II. Similarly to Johnson, Bacevich (2002, 133) points out the question of militarism as a central problem in this imperial policy, especially the "grandeur of America's post-Cold War military aspirations".

At the other end of the spectrum, Niall Ferguson (2004) also agrees that the United States had been an empire long before 9-11, albeit one in denial. In stark opposition to the authors mentioned above though, Ferguson considers that the world could benefit greatly if the United States gave a step further and unashamedly assumed the imperial mantle to become a full blown "liberal empire". The author provocatively argues that the experience of national independence after the period of decolonization "has been a disaster for most poor countries" (2004, 176), especially in Africa. The reason, Ferguson points out, lies in both the economic-financial international system (such as protectionism, lack of net capital flows, and restrictions on free labor) and in those countries' domestic structures. Therefore, Ferguson (2004, 183)

adds, "in most cases, their only hope for the future would seem to be occupied by a foreign power capable of constructing the basic institutional foundations indispensable for economic development". Whenever comparing with the British colonial experience, the author concludes that a liberal empire is needed for such a task. He goes on to give a specific example, insisting that "Liberia would benefit immeasurably from something like an American colonial administration" (Ferguson 2004, 198). Nevertheless, Ferguson (2004, 29) asserts that Americans "lack the imperial cast of mind" and that the United States has therefore been an "empire in denial", an "empire without imperialists", and an "empire by improvisation". His conclusion, thus, is that the United States should pursue "some profound changes in its economic structure, its social makeup and its political culture" to finally live up to its liberal imperial mission (Ferguson 2004, 301). In a similar fashion, Boot (2002, 347-8) highlights the benefits of U.S. imperial policies throughout history, but argues that if the United States does not develop a "bloody-minded attitude" and do not prepare "to get its hands dirty", then "it should stay home".

Between radical critics and enthusiastic apologists, there is a body of literature that takes a more nuanced approach, even though it may tilt more towards one or the other side. Bernard Porter (2006) argues that, while the United States has in fact shown imperial attitudes since its origins, it has become a "superempire" after 9-11, when it definitively transcended the predecessor British Empire to become something far greater. According to Porter, one major distinction between the American and the British empires is that the first is more ideologically driven. George Liska (1967, 109), who had written during the Cold war about the benefits of the United States exercising "an imperial role with greater magnanimity than the Romans were either prepared or even able to exercise", revised its position as a result of the aftermath of 9-11. In his more recent book, entitled "Twilight of Hegemony", Liska (2003) displays a considerably more negative tone. For Liska (2003), the best description of the policies pursued by the United States after 9-11 is neither empire nor hegemony – the author uses the term "hegemonism" to describe a situation in which the hegemonic power loses its self-control and a "rationally managed power is replaced by a political force and a soulless mechanism of senseless violence". He contrasts this with the Cold War strategy, seen as "a strategically rational contest of two differently conditioned and constituted, but essentially identical, imperial powers" (Liska 2003, 41). The fact that the end of the Cold War provided the United States with a counterbalancing imperial power, meant that its end would remove the "policing effects" inherent in that international structure. The United States then, would practice a "phantom hegemony" with Bush father and Clinton, which was basically a "reactionary" policy characterized by "reflexive responses" (Liska 2003, 13). The response given to the events of September 11, 2001, which was carried on under a feeling of omnipotence, would mean the transition "from phantom-hegemony to full-scale hegemonism" (Liska 2003, 36). This hegemonism is a "social pathology" that manifests itself in the "decay of imperial sense of obligation and consequent mission into a unilaterally prosecuted supremacist delusion" (Liska 2003, 41). The author identifies hegemonism as a response to an "early-stage of material decline relative to others or an earlier imperial self" (Liska 2003, 45). One important evidence of the dissolution, Liska (2003) points out, would be a moral secession of the European core from the American empire. It is interesting to notice that he mentions not only a relative material decline, but adds a moral and cultural dimension to maintaining the empire. Liska (2003,

52-3) adds that "replacing the regional core with a substitute regional control farther to the East might offer quantitative but not culturally equivalent replacement and replenishment". Thus, while Liska (2003) saw the Cold Ward United States as an empire with a sense of mission that brought order to the system, he describes the country that emerged after 9-11 as one with a pathology that makes it produce the opposite effect.

John B. Judis (2004) identifies the aftermath of the Spanish-American War as a period of U.S. imperialism, but argues that these policies were repudiated early on, especially by Wilson and Franklin Roosevelt. Wilson is credited to have "revolutionized American foreign policy" in what he repudiated the old notions of imperialism based on race and religion and set the goal of creating a world of democracies as the uppermost American ideal of foreign policy (Judis 2004, 117). For the author, the Cold War was a period that reflected the American commitment to dismantling imperialism, with a few setbacks in places, such as Vietnam and the Middle East. The immediate post-Cold War period is labeled as the "triumph of Wilsonianism", while the policies pursued by the Bush administration after 9-11 are seen as a rupture from the policies of Roosevelt and Wilson and a return to the imperial policies of the end of the nineteenth century. For Judis (2004, 166), what the United States tried to do in Iraq "was very similar to what the British Colonial Office had done in the region's oil states before World War II [...] Bush, whether in name or not, was reviving the imperial policies that Wilson and Franklin Roosevelt had repudiated". Therefore, the author's historical framework can be basically summed up in three different periods of U.S history: an initial "imperial moment" after the war with Spain; followed by repudiation of imperial policies that was later embodied in the "Cold War liberalism" from Truman to Reagan and in a "triumph of Wilsonianism" with Bush and Clinton; and, finally, a full blown revival of the imperial policies of the past with George W. Bush. Although Judis' approach may be debatable, his book is one of the few who actually compared events from 1898 and 2003. While several authors seem to forget the U.S. imperial experience in the Philippines, Judis considers that historical incident a central aspect in U.S. foreign policy history, which he denominates as "America's imperial moment". This perspective enables him to provide insightful comparisons, especially when it comes to the mood generated by initial easy victories that later proved to be deceiving. "In the wake of the surprisingly easy victory in Afghanistan", Judis (2004, 175) observes, the Bush administration "experienced the same rush of national power and the same illusion of omnipotence that the McKinley administration had experienced after the 'splendid little war' against Spain".

Conclusion

A number of commentators have noticed that when the United States entered the great power game in the late nineteenth century it acted like an adolescent – "brash, bold, and impetuous", as Dobson (1988, 201) puts it. Under this view, colonial adventures in places, such as the Philippines are seen as a reflection of U.S. "adolescent indiscretion" (Schoultz 1998, 192) – a country that had acquired great power and now had to make decisions on how to use it. As most adolescents, the United States of late nineteenth century was deeply affected by its surroundings. Living in a world of empires, it seemed just natural for Americans to behave like

one themselves. But they soon found out that the real world of empires was far harsher than their juvenile mind had pictured. When the grandiose plans to civilize cultures seen as inferiors fell prey to the Filipino jungles, U.S. statesmen and public opinion were forced to reevaluate the effectiveness of imperial solutions. Fourteen years fighting in the Philippines left a deep impression in the minds of the young American power, one that definitively helped it to grow up and reach maturity.

By the end of World War II, the United States was a much more mature power. Having surpassed all other nations in the world in practically every indicator of power that mattered, now that Americans actually dispose of imperial power they were considerably reluctant to use it. This time, however, the imperial call came from the other side of the Atlantic. On one hand, Europeans insisted for U.S. involvement in their reconstruction and protection. On the other hand, now that the United States was a global power, it had global responsibilities and combating the rival Soviet empire was the number one priority. These two forces were joined together to create the willingness to make the United States resort once again to imperial solutions. As the Cold War unfolded, U.S global responsibilities became more and more far-reaching, so much so that it saw itself entangled in Vietnam almost without realizing it. As in the Philippines, when the United States had taken over for what remained of the Spanish empire, in Vietnam it ended up taking over for what remained of the French empire. As in the Philippines, indigenous forces in Vietnam reacted strongly and reminded Americans once again that being an empire comes with a high price tag – money, sweat, and blood. As in the Philippines, what was initially seen as an easy victory of a great power against an insignificant country, turned out to be a lengthy battle that led to a repulsion of imperial strategies. The similarities between Vietnam and the Philippines seem so evident that it is just remarkable that so few authors have addressed the topic. Before the Vietnam syndrome, one could argue that there was a Philippines syndrome.

Considering that the United States went to the Philippines in an adolescent mood, as an immature power that was still learning to play the great power game, but went to Vietnam as a grown-up global power that became gradually committed to an extent that it was indiscernible when its involvement actually turned into an American war, a case can be made that after 2001 the U.S. power started to show signs of senility. The attacks of September 11 set into motion a series of events that it seemed as if the United States had developed a pathology that one could call "hegemonism" (Liska 2003). All the multilateral fora that had been built during the period of U.S. power's maturity, notably NATO and the UN, were deemed at best irrelevant and at worst an impediment to fully applying the U.S. power in an age of unipolarity. After living for a decade in a unipolar environment, by the beginning of the twenty-first century, a sense of omnipotence had been developed, the same sense that led the United States to the Philippines in the nineteenth century and to Vietnam in the twentieth. In both events, this sense of omnipotence would quickly die down as troops on the ground fell prey to an inhospitable environment. The United States fought guerrilla wars in the Philippines and Vietnam that lasted for over a decade and that weakened American power. Iraq shows no signs that it will follow a very different path.

When analyzing the American imperial ventures, it is clear that they were not planned. McKinley's campaign for president is notorious for barely mentioning foreign policy issues. Truman, who built the framework of the American empire in the Cold War, had no choice but to

be concerned with foreign policy, but he clearly had no imperial designs in mind. The fact that national security spending from 1945 to 1948 was reduced by almost 90% confirms this trend. As his successor in the presidency, Truman often repeated that U.S. troops would be deployed abroad for a short period of time. Vietnam was a consequence of the U.S. gradual involvement in that region, and the Cold War mindset had become too powerful to avoid escalation there. Johnson – who once said that "I do not want to be the President who built empires" (Gaddis 2005, 268) – had little interest in foreign policy issues and would have been far happier focusing efforts only on his domestic agenda. Bush run a presidential campaign touting a "humble" foreign policy that in the first months of his administration sounded like a disentanglement from the world at large. In the three cases the imperial urge did not appear spontaneously. McKinley went to war with Spain and took the Philippines after intense debate with himself and with Congress. Successive U.S. administrations became gradually involved in Vietnam as a result of the Cold War and of how the situation on the ground evolved, and not as a thought-out plan from scratch. Bush only unleashed the imperial temptation after an unforeseen tragedy of enormous psychological proportions for the country. Both George W. Bush and Lyndon Johnson succeeded in transferring considerable power from the Congress to the executive branch, an action that was seen as necessary in order to pursue their imperial policies. McKinley did not need such action, since the imperial push then came more from the public opinion at large than from the White House. Both efforts were greeted by strong indigenous reaction to U.S. imperial policies, which led to a reassessment of such policies.

In the famous Shakespearean monologue, Hamlet, the main character, after asking "To be or not to be: that is the question", adds:

> *Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer*
> *The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,*
> *Or to take arms against a sea of troubles*
> *And by opposing end them?*

Between suffering the arrows of fortune and taking arms against a sea of troubles, the United States has often chosen the latter. But if metaphorical slings and arrows of outrageous fortune were, thus, avoided, attempts to oppose and put an end to troubles in places, such as The Philippines, Vietnam, and Iraq ended up generating enough resistance to make U.S. statesmen wonder and keep asking the old Hamletian question.

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