

From Empire Back to Republic? Toward the Restoration of the American Republic. Towards A National Anti-Imperialist Consensus?

The possibility of a conservative-progressive consensus in defense of the American Republic and the Constitution? Book Review

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Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [History](#)

*In the 2010 book *American Empire Before the Fall*, Bruce Fein maintains that beginning with the notion of Manifest Destiny and the launching of war against Mexico in 1846, and culminating in the endless wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the United States has abandoned the principles that constituted the foundation of the nation as a Republic, converting itself into an empire. He calls upon the American people take up their moral duty to restore the American Republic.*

Fein is among the founders of the American Freedom Agenda, which was established in 2007 by disaffected conservatives demanding that the Republican Party return to its traditional mistrust of concentrated government power.

Fein's analysis includes specific proposals that have a progressive ring, which suggests the possibility of a conservative-progressive consensus in defense of the American Republic and the Constitution. Such proposals include impeachment of a president who deceives the Congress or the people to obtain authorization to initiate war; prohibition of war against non-state actors, like Al Qaeda or Taliban, or against a tactic, such as terrorism; renunciation of the current war against international terrorism, replaced by an alternative approach that treats international terrorists as criminals; prohibition of military bases or troops abroad, except through Congressional declaration; the abolition of the state secrets privilege; and prohibition of the detaining of persons as enemy combatants without accusation or trial.



Fein identifies four Charter Documents: The Declaration of Independence, the United States Constitution, George Washington's Farewell Address, and a July 4, 1821 speech by then Secretary of State John Quincy Adams.

These documents "expounded the nation's revolutionary philosophy: individual liberty and due process over a national security state; government by the consent of the governed; a separation of powers; checks and balances; and sovereignty in 'We the People,' not a King

or monarch.” The revolutionary philosophy reflected a distrust of government; and the first ten amendments to the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, were intended to arrest governmental power.

Fein captures the individualism tied to a concept of a limited state that is central to the creed of the American Republic at its founding. He writes that the philosophy of the Republic placed the individual at the center of society. It was believed that individual liberty was attained through limited control and regulation of the individual by the government.

Fein, however, does not see the Charter Documents as living documents, that is, as establishing the foundation for an evolving society, in which changing conditions create the need to formulate new interpretations of philosophical principles. Even before the Republic was established, the merchants and producers of New England and the mid-Atlantic colonies were benefiting from trading relations with slave economies in the Caribbean as well as Charleston and Virginia, and this lucrative trade was made possible by strong, repressive states. But this state support of commerce was not visible to the merchants and producers, because the role of *their* state was limited; they experienced the trade as natural, as not involving state support or regulation.

But this would soon change. The conquest of territories to the West created the material conditions for capitalism to evolve to the stage of monopoly capitalism, in which large companies and trusts emerged that were not subjected to any checks on their power. In this new economic situation, if the rights of the people were to be defended, there needed to be a revised understanding of the relation between the citizen and the state. Beginning with that historic moment, the rights of the people would have to be defended through the control of the state by the people, and their use of the state as a check on the power of corporations, thus provoking a significant practical shift in the concept of the balance of powers. However, in the American story, the people never arrived to control the state, so its capacity to check the corporations has been limited, and attained mostly through a process of elite concessions to popular protests and demands.

Fein is right in calling the people to reject empire and turn to the task of restoring the American Republic. But the restoration must be based on a revision of the principles of the Charter Documents, taking into account that the people now live in a world dominated by large corporations. Such revision itself must be based on the Charter Documents. That is, all new and reformulated principles must be established as Constitutional Amendments, supported by laws enacted by the U.S. Congress, acting on behalf of the political will of the majority of the people. The Founding Fathers were not proposing that subsequent generations of Americans had to embrace their philosophy, which was formulated in a particular historical, social, and political context. Rather, they were insisting that any changes in philosophy, law, or policy had to be implemented in accordance with the Constitution, the juridical foundation of the Republic.

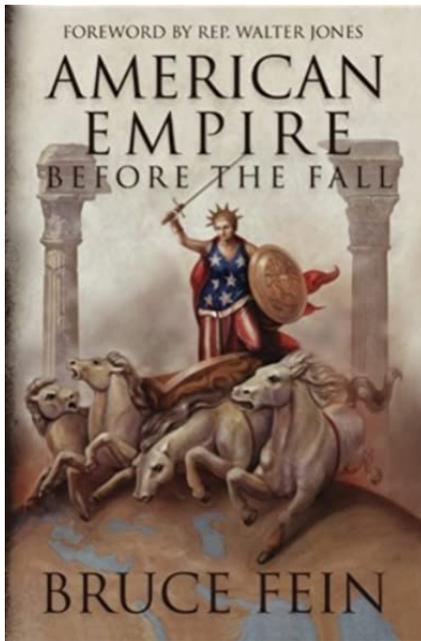
There is another significant limitation in Fein’s insightful analysis. Fein does not see the economic benefits that accrued to the United States in its turn from Republic to Empire. He does not see the importance of conquest, colonialism, neocolonialism, and imperialism in creating and sustaining the global economic structures that facilitate the development of the core nations. He sees the U.S. turn to empire as a psychological problem. He writes that “the American Empire concocts national security worries from trifles as light as air to justify intervention for the psychic thrill of power.” He believes that the American Empire is

“endlessly at war everywhere on the planet to enjoy the juvenile thrill of domination and swagger,” . . . “for nothing more than the psychic gratification of domination.”

The idea that imperialism is an irrational psychological disposition toward conquest without material benefits to the conquerors was formulated in the classic essay “Imperialism” by the Austrian economist Joseph Schumpeter, originally published in Germany in 1919. But during the course of the twentieth century, anti-imperialist movements in Latin America and anti-colonial movements in Asia and Africa emerged. These movements understood imperialism as a practice, as a continuous series of measures designed to ensure the access of the global powers to raw materials, superexploited labor, and markets for surplus goods; continuous policies that promoted the underdevelopment of the colonized and neocolonized as they promoted the development of the core zone. A mature understanding in our time requires appropriation of this insight into the economic logic and immorality of modern imperialism, formulated from the perspective of the victims of imperialist practice, who constitute the majority of humanity.

In not seeing the economic motives of empire, Fein reflects the limited consciousness of intellectuals of the North, who by and large do not see the relation between the economic development of the West and the conquest and colonization of vast regions of the world from the sixteenth through the twentieth centuries. They share this limitation with George Washington, who in his Farewell Address of 1796, as Fein approvingly reports, expressed the conviction that the American Republic can expand its commerce while having little political involvement in the affairs of other nations. The father of the nation should be forgiven for such limited understanding, inasmuch as he lived prior to the emergence of popular revolutionary movements in Latin America, Asia, and Africa, which lifted up political leaders and intellectuals capable of explaining the economic development of some nations on a foundation of conquest, colonialism, neocolonialism, imperialism, and superexploitation.

A century and a half later, President Dwight Eisenhower, looking at the question from the practical point of view of U.S. economic interests, understood the connection between foreign affairs and the economy. He declared in 1953, “Foreign policy should be based primarily on one consideration. That consideration is the need for the U.S. to obtain certain raw materials to sustain its economy and, when possible, to preserve profitable foreign markets for our surpluses. Out of this need grows the necessity for making certain that those areas of the world in which essential raw materials are produced are not only accessible to us, but their populations and governments are willing to trade with us on a friendly basis.” For Fein, Ike’s precise and frank formulation is nothing more than the “specious orthodoxy” of the American Empire, which is irrationally driven by domination as an end in itself.



Although Fein does not see the economic logic of imperialism, *American Empire Before the Fall* makes clear that empire has become too costly for the United States, politically and economically, and it therefore is not sustainable. Moreover, Fein documents with great clarity that U.S. militarist imperialist aggressions have been made politically possible through a persistent pattern of presidents lying to the Congress and to the people. He provides persuasive evidence that various presidents have withheld information from Congress in order to solicit Congressional support for war: Polk (Mexican-American War), Truman (Korean War), Johnson (Vietnam War and intervention in the Dominican Republic), Nixon (secret bombing of Cambodia), Clinton (Bosnia), and Bush 23 (Iraq War). He further maintains that such conduct is an impeachable offense. Imagine impeaching a president for something that really mattered, like launching an unconstitutional and illegal war!

Above and beyond the pattern of lying by presidents to justify particular wars, Fein maintains that the American Empire at its foundation is defended with the myth that the United States must defend democracy and human rights in the world in order to ensure international stability and access to resources, and this for the most part noble goal requires a global military presence. Fein writes that the people have been indoctrinated into the orthodoxy of the American Empire, which maintains that "the United States has been obligated by divine Providence to make the world safe for democracy and freedom, and to crush every conceivable foreign danger before it germinates."

Fein further maintains that the national response to terrorism ought to be freed from the myths, distortions, and exaggerations of empire. He maintains that international terrorism is a crime, not an act of war; international terrorists should be treated as criminals, not warriors or combatants. He writes that "the terrorism threat can and should be defeated by an aggressive enforcement of the criminal law in federal civilian courts, coupled with Special Forces to eliminate terrorists who cannot be captured and brought to justice."

Fein maintains that the restoration of the American Republic is the duty of every citizen. He envisions the emergence of a new political leadership that is able to inspire the people to defend the Constitution. In this he is entirely correct.

The new political leadership should base its appeal to the people on a national narrative that avoids the idealist errors of conservatives and progressives. Although it ought to affirm the

sacredness of the Charter Documents of the nation, the new leadership at the same time has to recognize the different economic reality of today's world, defined by transnational corporations that operate with insufficient constraints; and it has to affirm the changed national values since the era of the Founding Fathers with respect to race, gender, and environment, without castigating the founders for being products of their time.

The new leadership has to adopt an anti-imperialist platform as the only sustainable option for the nation, and it also has to formulate a realistic long-term comprehensive economic plan for the nation in a post-neocolonial world-system, a plan that weans the nation from the permanent war economy that has been integrally connected to imperialism. Although opposing military presence in all regions of the planet, the new political leadership it has to support a strong military for self-defense and for defense of the national territory; and a strong, integrated law enforcement system that is able effectively counter the crimes of domestic and international terrorism, but in accordance with the due process principles of the Constitution. With respect to possible threats to the security of citizens and the nation as a whole, it has to find a common-sense balance between naiveté and exaggeration.

The new political leadership has to lead a process of change in the right way, in accordance with the Constitution and the law and with standards of reasoning and truth. It has to explain to and teach the people, convoking them to the restoration of the Republic and the fulfillment of the American promise of democracy.

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