

U.S. Savage Imperialism

The U.S. Empire, the Mideast, and the world, part I

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It's tempting to go back to the beginning. The beginning goes pretty far back, but it is useful to think about some aspects of American history that bear directly on current U.S. policy in the Middle East. The U.S. is a pretty unusual country in many ways. It's maybe the only country in the world that was founded as an empire. It was an infant empire—as George Washington called it—and the founding fathers had broad aspirations. The most libertarian of them, Thomas Jefferson, thought that this infant empire should spread and become what he called the “nest” from which the entire continent would be colonized. That would get rid of the “Red,” the Indians as they'd be driven away or exterminated. The Blacks would be sent back to Africa when we don't need them anymore and the Latins will be eliminated by a superior race.

Conquest of the National Territory

It was a very racist country all the way through its history, not just anti-black. That was Jefferson's image and the others more or less agreed with it. So it's a settler colonialist society. Settler colonialism is far and away the worst kind of imperialism, the most savage kind because it requires eliminating the indigenous population. That's not unrelated, I think, to the kind of reflexive U.S. support for Israel—which is also a settler colonial society. Its policies resonate with a sense of American history. It's kind of reliving it. It goes beyond that because the early settlers in the U.S. were religious fundamentalists who regarded themselves as the children of Israel, following the divine commandment to settle the promised land and slaughter the Amalekites and so on and so forth. That's right around here, the early settlers in Massachusetts.

✖ All this was done with the utmost benevolence. So, for example, Massachusetts (the Mayflower and all that business) was given its Charter by the King of England in 1629. The Charter commissioned the settlers to save the native population from the misery of paganism. And, in fact, if you look at the great seal of the Bay Colony of Massachusetts, it depicts an Indian holding an arrow pointed down in a sign of peace. And out of his mouth is a scroll on which is written: “Come over and help us.” That's one of the first examples of what's called humanitarian intervention today. And it's typical of other cases up to the present. The Indians were pleading with the colonists to come over and help them and the colonists were benevolently following the divine command to come over and help them. It turned out we were helping by exterminating them.

That was considered rather puzzling. Around the 1820s, one Supreme Court justice wrote about it. He says it's kind of strange that, despite all our benevolence and love for the

Indians, they are withering and dispersing like the “leaves of autumn.” And how could this be? He said, the divine will of providence is “beyond human comprehension.” It’s just God’s will. We can’t hope to understand it. This conception—it’s called Providentialism—that we are always following God’s will goes right up to the present moment. Whatever we’re doing, we’re following God’s will. It’s an extremely religious country, off the spectrum in religious belief. A very large percentage of the population—I don’t remember the numbers, but it’s quite high—believes in the literal word of the Bible and part of that means supporting everything that Israel does because God promised the promised land to Israel. So we have to support them.

These same people—a substantial core of solid support for anything Israel does—also happen to be the most extreme anti-Semites in the world. They make Hitler look pretty mild. They are looking forward to the near total annihilation of the Jews after Armageddon. There’s a whole long story about this, which is believed, literally, in high places—probably people like Reagan, George W. Bush, and others. It ties in with the kind of settler colonial history of Christian Zionism—which long preceded Jewish Zionism and is much stronger. It provides a solid base of reflexive support for whatever Israel happens to be doing.

The conquest of the national territory was a pretty ugly affair. It was recognized by some of the more honest figures like John Quincy Adams who was the great grand strategist of expansionism—the theorist of Manifest Destiny and so on. In his later years, long after his own horrifying crimes were in the past, he did lament what he called the fate of that “hapless race of native Americans, which we are exterminating with such merciless and perfidious cruelty.” He said that’s one of the sins that the Lord is going to punish us for. Still waiting for that.

His doctrines are highly praised right to the present. There’s a major scholarly book by John Lewis Gaddis, a leading American historian, on the roots of the Bush doctrine. Gaddis correctly, plausibly, describes the Bush doctrine as a direct descendent of John Quincy Adams’s grand strategy. He says, it’s a concept that runs right through American history. He praises it; thinks it’s the right conception—that we have to protect our security, that expansion is the path to security and that you can’t really have security until you control everything. So we have to expand, not just over the hemisphere, but over the world. That’s the Bush doctrine.

By WWII, without going into the details, though the U.S. had long been by far the richest country in the world, it was playing a kind of secondary role in world affairs. The main actor in world affairs was the British—even the French had a more global reach. WWII changed all that. American planners during WWII, Roosevelt’s planners, understood very well from the beginning of the war that it was going to end with the U.S. in a position of overwhelming power.

As the war went on and the Russians ground down the Germans and pretty much won the European war, it was understood that the U.S. would be even more dominant. And they laid careful plans for what the post-war world would look like. The United States would have total control over a region that would include the Western Hemisphere, the Far East, the former British Empire, and as much of Eurasia as possible, including, crucially, its commercial and industrial core—Western Europe. That’s the minimum. The maximum was the whole world and, of course, we need that for security. Within this region, the U.S. would have unquestioned control and would limit any effort at sovereignty by others.

The U.S. ended the war in a position of dominance and security that had no remote counterpart in history. It had half the world's wealth, it controlled the whole hemisphere, the opposite sides of both oceans. It wasn't total. The Russians were there and some things were still not under control, but it was remarkably expansive. Right at the center of it was the Middle East.

One of President Roosevelt's long-time, high-level advisers, Adolf A. Berle, a leading liberal, pointed out that control of Middle East oil would yield substantial control of the world—and that doctrine remains. It's a doctrine that's operative right at this moment and that remains a leading theme of policy.

After World War II

For a long time during the Cold War years, policies were invariably justified by the threat of the Russians. It was mostly an invented threat. The Russians ran their own smaller empire with a similar pretext, threat of the Americans. These clouds were lifted after the collapse of the Soviet Union. For those who want to understand American foreign policy, an obvious place to look is what happened after the Soviet Union disappeared. That's the natural place to look and it follows almost automatically that nobody looks at it. It's scarcely discussed in the scholarly literature though it's obviously where you'd look to find out what the Cold War was about. In fact, if you actually do look, you get very clear answers. The president at the time was George Bush I. Immediately after the collapse of the Berlin Wall, there was a new National Security Strategy, a defense budget, and so on. They make very interesting reading. The basic message is: nothing is going to change except pretexts. So we still need, they said, a huge military force, not to defend ourselves against the Russian hordes because they're gone, but because of what they called the "technological sophistication" of third world powers. Now, if you're a well trained, educated person who came from Harvard and so on, you're not supposed to laugh when you hear that. And nobody laughed. In fact, I don't think anybody ever reported it. So, they said, we have to protect ourselves from the technological sophistication of third world powers and we have to maintain what they called the "defense industrial base"—a euphemism for high tech industry, which mostly came out of the state sector (computers, the Internet, and so on), under the pretext of defense.

With regard to the Middle East, they said, we must maintain our intervention forces, most of them aimed at the Middle East. Then comes an interesting phrase. We have to maintain the intervention forces aimed at the Middle East where the major threats to our interests "could not be laid at the Kremlin's door." In other words, sorry folks, we've been lying to you for 50 years, but now that pretext is gone, we'll tell you the truth. The problem in the Middle East is and has been what's called radical nationalism. Radical just means independent. It's a term that means "doesn't follow orders." The radical nationalism can be of any kind. Iran's a good case.

The Threat of Radical Nationalism

So in 1953, the Iranian threat was secular nationalism. After 1978, it's religious nationalism. In 1953, it was taken care of by overthrowing the parliamentary regime and installing a dictator who was highly praised. It wasn't a secret. The *New York Times*, for example, had an editorial praising the overthrow of the government as an "object lesson" to small countries that "go berserk" with radical nationalism and seek to control their own resources. This will be an object lesson to them: don't try any of that nonsense, certainly not in an area

we need for control of the world. That was 1953.

Since the overthrow of the U.S.-imposed tyrant in 1979, Iran has been constantly under U.S. attack—without a stop. First, Carter tried to reverse the overthrow of the Shah immediately by trying to instigate a military coup. That didn't work. The Israelis—in effect the ambassador, as there'd been close relations between Israel and Iran under the Shah, although theoretically no formal relations—advised that if we could find military officers who were willing to shoot down 10,000 people in the streets, we could restore the Shah. Zbigniew Brzezinski, Carter's National Security advisor, had pretty much the same advice. That didn't quite work. Right away, the U.S. turned for support to Saddam Hussein in his invasion of Iran—which was no small affair. Hundreds of thousands of Iranians were slaughtered. The people who are now running the country are veterans of that war and deep in their consciousness is the understanding that the whole world is against them—the Russians, the Americans were all supporting Saddam Hussein and the effort to overthrow the new Islamic state.

It was no small thing. The U.S. support for Saddam Hussein was extreme. Saddam's crimes—like the Anfal genocide, the massacre of the Kurds—were just denied. The Reagan administration denied them or blamed them on Iran. Iraq was even given a very rare privilege. It's the only country other than Israel which has been granted the privilege of attacking a U.S. naval vessel and getting away with complete impunity. In the Israeli case, it was the *Liberty* in 1967. In Iraq's case it was the *USS Stark* in 1987—a naval vessel which was part of the U.S. fleet protecting Iraqi shipments from Iran during the war. They attacked the ship using French missiles, killed a few dozen sailors, and got a slight tap on the wrist, but nothing beyond that.

U.S. support was so strong that they basically won the war for Iraq. After the war was over, U.S. support for Iraq continued. In 1989, George Bush I invited Iraqi nuclear engineers to the U.S. for advanced training in nuclear weapons development. It's one of those little things that gets hushed up because a couple of months later Saddam became a bad boy. He disobeyed orders. Right after that came harsh sanctions and so on, right up till today.

The Iranian Threat

Coming up to today, in the foreign policy literature and general commentary what you commonly read is that the major policy problem for the U.S. has been and remains the threat of Iran. What exactly is the threat of Iran? Actually, we have an authoritative answer to that. It came out a couple of months ago in submissions to Congress by the DOD and US intelligence. They report to Congress every year on the global security situation. The latest reports, in April, of course have a section on Iran—the major threat. It's important reading. What they say is, whatever the Iranian threat is, it's not a military threat. They say that Iranian military spending is quite low, even by regional standards, and as compared with the U.S., of course, it's invisible—probably less than 2 percent of our military spending. Furthermore, they say that Iranian military doctrine is geared toward defense of the national territory, designed to slow down an invasion sufficiently so it will be possible for diplomacy to begin to operate. That's their military doctrine. They say it's possible that Iran is thinking about nuclear weapons. They don't go beyond that, but they say, if they were to develop nuclear weapons, it would be as part of Iran's deterrence strategy in an effort to prevent an attack, which is not a remote contingency. The most massive military power in history—namely us—which has been extremely hostile to them, is occupying two countries on their borders and is openly threatening them with attack, as is its Israeli client.

That's the military side of the Iranian threat as reported in *Military Balance*. Nevertheless, they say, Iran's a major threat because it's attempting to expand its influence in neighboring countries. It's called destabilization. They're carrying out destabilization in neighboring countries by trying to expand their influence and that's a problem for the U.S. because the U.S. is trying to bring about stability. When the U.S. invades another country, it's to bring about stability—a technical term in the international relations literature that means obedience to U.S. orders. So when we invade Iraq and Afghanistan, that's to create stability. If the Iranians try to extend their influence, at least to neighboring countries, that's destabilizing. This is built in to scholarly and other doctrine. It's even possible to say without ridicule, as was done by the liberal commentator and former editor of *Foreign Affairs*, James Chase, that the U.S. had to destabilize Chile under Allende to bring about stability, namely obedience to U.S. orders.

What's Terrorism?

The second threat of Iran is its support for terrorism. What's terrorism? Two examples of Iran's support for terrorism are offered. One is its support for Hezbollah in Lebanon, the other its support for Hamas in Palestine. Whatever you think of Hezbollah and Hamas—maybe you think they're the worst thing in the world—what exactly is considered their terrorism? Well, the "terrorism" of Hezbollah is actually celebrated in Lebanon every year on May 25, Lebanon's national holiday commemorating the expulsion of Israeli invaders from Lebanese territory in 2000. Hezbollah resistance and guerilla warfare finally forced Israel to withdraw from Southern Lebanon, which Israel had been occupying for 22 years in violation of Security Council orders, with plenty of terror and violence and torture.

So Israel finally left and that's Lebanese Liberation Day. That's what's considered the main core of Hezbollah terrorism. It's the way it's described. Actually, in Israel it's even described as aggression. You can read the Israeli press these days where high level figures now argue that it was a mistake to withdraw from South Lebanon because that permits Iran to pursue its "aggression" against Israel, which it had been carrying out until 2000 by supporting the resistance to Israeli occupation. That's considered aggression against Israel. They follow U.S. principles, as we say the same thing. That's Hezbollah. There are other acts you could criticize, but that's the core of Hezbollah terrorism.

Another Hezbollah crime is that the Hezbollah-based coalition handily won the latest parliamentary vote, though because of the sectarian system of assigning seats, they did not receive the majority. That led Thomas Friedman to shed tears of joy, as he explained, over the marvels of free elections, in which U.S. President Obama defeated Iranian President Ahmadinejad in Lebanon. Others joined in this celebration. The actual voting record was never reported, to my knowledge.

✖ What about Hamas? Hamas became a serious threat—a serious terrorist organization—in January 2006 when Palestinians committed a really serious crime. That was the date of the first free election in any country in the Arab world and the Palestinians voted the wrong way. That's unacceptable to the U.S. Immediately, without a blink of an eye, the U.S. and Israel turned very publically towards punishing the Palestinians for that crime. You can read in the *New York Times*, in parallel columns, right afterwards—one of them talking about our love for democracy and so on and right alongside it, our plans to punish the Palestinians for the way they voted in the January election. No sense of conflict.

There'd been plenty of punishment of the Palestinians before the election, but it escalated

afterwards—Israel went so far as to cut off the flow of water to the arid Gaza Strip. By June, Israel had fired about 7,700 rockets at Gaza and all sorts of other things. All of that's called defense against terrorism. Then, the U.S. and Israel, with cooperation from the Palestinian Authority, tried to carry out a military coup to overthrow the elected government. They were beaten back and Hamas took control. After that, Hamas became one of the world's leading terrorist forces. There's plenty of criticisms you can make of them—the way they treat their own population, for example—but Hamas terrorism is a little hard to establish. The current claim is that their terrorism consists of rockets from Gaza that hit Israel's border cities. That was the justification given for Operation Cast Lead (the U.S./Israeli invasion of December 2008) and also for the Israeli attack on the flotilla last June in international waters where nine people were murdered.

It's only in a deeply indoctrinated country that you can hear that and not laugh in ridicule. Putting aside the comparison between Qassam rockets and the terrorism that the U.S. and Israel are constantly carrying out, the argument has absolutely no credibility for a simple reason: Israel and the U.S. know exactly how to stop the rockets—by peaceful means. In June 2008, Israel agreed to a ceasefire with Hamas. Israel didn't really live up to it—they were supposed to open the borders and they didn't—but Hamas did live up to it. You can look it up on the official Israeli website or listen to their official spokesperson, Mark Regev, and they agree that during the ceasefire there wasn't a single Hamas rocket fired.

Israel broke the ceasefire in November 2008 when it invaded Gaza and killed half a dozen Hamas activists. Then there was some rocket fire and far greater attacks from Israel. A number of people were killed—all Palestinians. Hamas offered to renew the ceasefire. The Israeli cabinet considered it and rejected it, preferring to use violence. A couple of days later came the U.S./Israel attack on Gaza.

In the U.S. and the West generally, it is taken for granted, even by human rights groups and the Goldstone report, that Israel had the right to force and self-defense. There were criticisms that the attack was disproportionate, but they're a secondary matter as Israel had absolutely no right to use force in the first place. You have no justification for the use of force unless you've exhausted peaceful means. In this case, the U.S. and Israel had not just not exhausted them, they had refused even to try peaceful means, which they had every reason to believe would succeed. The concession that Israel had a right to attack is just an amazing gift.

In any case, according to the DOD and U.S. intelligence, Iran's efforts to extend its influence, as well as its support for Hezbollah and Hamas, are what constitute, for the U.S. and its allies, the Iranian threat.

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