

Bush the Empire Slayer

by *Bernard Chazelle*

*I*f you fancy losing an argument, try shooting down my contention that Mikhail Gorbachev is the leading historical figure of our time. Not one to miss a shooting opportunity, Dick Cheney tried. To my surprise, he won.

Westerners fondly remember Gorbachev for finishing off an ailing Soviet empire left bleeding from its Afghan travails. Defusing half a century of nuclear tension can leave a mark on impressionable minds. On Cheney's—not so much. The former Defense Secretary had a tender spot for the Cold War and never forgave Gorbachev for ending it with not even a kind word for defense contractors. Cheney is the quintessential warrior, with plenty of dead quails and birdshot-peppered lawyers to prove it. He is the gallant hussar—one day greenlighting “Shock and Awe” to give Guernica a second chance; the next day apprising US Senator Pat Leahy of his favorite sexual technique: “*Fuck yourself!*”⁽¹⁾ Quite the martial wag, the man Maureen Dowd calls Big-Time Dick saluted the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 by persuading his boss to invade Panama (for reasons no one seems able to remember). And today it is anybody's guess which Caribbean island the United States will invade to celebrate its victory in Iraq.

Dick Cheney is a man of war, and a man on a mission: a crusader who won't rest until the name Bush Jr is etched in the history books—not lost in the microscopic print of the endnotes section, mind you, as is destined to be Senior's fate, but glowing in the radiant typeface of a chapter heading. That mission, for once, is all but accomplished. In January of 2001, George W. Bush took—er, grabbed—the reins of an American Empire at its zenith. He will soon hand back a smoldering wreckage of broken lives, enduring hatred, and vanished influence. Michael Ignatieff has called Pax Americana *Empire Lite*.⁽²⁾ A better phrase would be *Empire*

Short-Lived, or, if you're William F. Buckley Jr and the vernacular ruffles your literary feathers, *Imperium Brevissimum*. At a recent ceremony for his son Jeb, George H. W. Bush was caught on national television sobbing uncontrollably. Pity the man who stands one short letter away from the worst president in US history. The letter is H, as in H for hubris.

“*We're winning!*” exulted Bush last October. ⁽³⁾ Well... actually, “*We're not winning,*” he clarified a few weeks later, but “*We're not losing*” either. ⁽⁴⁾ So “*We're wosing,*” quipped the Guardian's cartoonist Steve Bell. Indeed, we are; and for you, Mr President, I shall count the wosing ways.

Somewhere, deep in the cold, worm-infested soil that a mother will keep watered by tears, lies one of 3,000 young Americans. ⁽⁵⁾ Dispersed across the land, thousands more will forever carry the scars of war in their battered bodies and hollowed souls, mutants battling hellish shadows and silent phantoms. And the Iraqis, yes *those*, Mr President, see them spiral into Dante's lower rings of hell, as they join the fastest-growing sect in the land: the dead—hundreds of thousands strong. ⁽⁶⁾ Watch the White Man's Burden devolve into an orgy of torture and mayhem. (Has it ever devolved into anything else?)



**“ You smug-faced crowds with kindling eye
Who cheer when soldier lads march by,
Sneak home and pray you'll never know
The hell where youth and laughter go. ”**
— Siegfried Sassoon

The words Abu Ghraib, Guantánamo, detainee bill, and extraordinary rendition are seared in the world's consciousness as the badges of shame of a democracy gone mad. According to Pew's most recent “Global Opinion” survey, “*anti-Americanism is deeper and broader now than at any time in modern history.*” ⁽⁷⁾ The war effort's claim on the US treasury will soon exceed \$600 billion: more than Vietnam; ⁽⁴⁾ more than all the money ever spent on cancer research; ⁽⁸⁾ more than enough to “race for the cure” all the way to Alpha Centauri. We're wosing big, Mr President.

Historians will ponder how one gangly caveman and nineteen scrawny associates turned America into the land of the kind-of-free (53rd freest press in the world, tied with Botswana ⁽⁹⁾) and the home of the petrified. The sons and daughters of the nation that stood up to Hitler and Tojo now file through airport security barefoot, much as they would walk, shoeless, into a mosque—a mosque, they pray, empty of Muslims.

Cravenness is bigotry's favorite nourishment, and cynics might expect the political class to gorge on it by blaming our imperial agony on the natives. In America, today, cynics rarely go

wrong; and the air, indeed, is thick with talk of fainthearted hordes of Mesopotamian ingrates, who quail at the latest bombing and wail at the moon in exotic garb.

Not long ago, the achingly earnest Nicholas D. Kristof, a New York Times columnist whose only sin is to be more virtuous than you—and keep you informed of this in each and every one of his bromidic columns—reassured his readers that the trouble is not with the Muslims but with the Arabs. They are too violent and they give Islam a bad name. ⁽¹⁰⁾ Well, that settles that. Funny, though, that in the last twenty years Americans have outkilled Arabs in a ratio in excess of one hundred to one. But there I go again, nitpicking, while Saint Kristof is back in Cambodia, rescuing teenage prostitutes one Pulitzer prize at a time.

Not to be undone, The Times' resident flat-earther, Thomas L. Friedman, never tires of recycling Golda Meir's racist rant about hateful Arabs. He writes:

“We can't keep asking Americans to sacrifice their children for people who hate each other more than they love their own children.” ⁽¹¹⁾

The hate-lovers never asked for anybody's sacrifice, Mr Friedman. To steal a thought from the heroic Robert Fisk, all they ever craved was the one freedom you've always refused to grant them: freedom from you! The Washington Post columnist Richard Cohen, a man who's never met a heap of moral compost he did not want to climb, wrote recently that *“the prudent use of violence [against Muslims] could be therapeutic.”* ⁽¹²⁾ Being a kind soul, I'll assume that Cohen is unaware of the ideological pedigree of that phrase and that he doesn't read what he writes—apparently, a skill highly prized in American punditry.

To talk the neocolonial talk from the plush comfort of the imperial capital is easy. To walk the walk is not. US military expenditures exceed those of all nations on earth *combined*. And yet battling a ragtag band of lightly armed insurgents was more than the world's mightiest army could take. It is *“about broken,”* laments Colin Powell—and, by the way, *“We are losing.”* ⁽¹³⁾ A recent Marine Corps memo concedes that Coalition Forces *“are no longer capable of militarily defeating the insurgency in al-Anbar.”* ⁽¹⁴⁾ Last summer's stabilization push in Baghdad, Operation Together Forward II, proved a dismal failure: the violence actually rose by 43 percent! ⁽¹⁵⁾



*“Your new-caught, sullen peoples,
Half-devil and half-child.”*
— Rudyard Kipling

The US military has been fighting in Iraq longer than it did in World War II. What does it have to show for it? Not much. Unlike Vietnam, Iraq is a country-wide killing field, one giant Sniper Alley where sporting the Stars and Stripes can get you killed any time, anywhere. Not a square inch of Iraqi soil is safe for the Americans outside the high walls of their fortresses. To

borrow from Cheney's vast repertoire of *bons mots*, the US counterinsurgency is in its last throes; hence the “surge” and kindred shows of desperation. Israel's finest military historian, Martin van Creveld, does not mince words: “*The American military have proved totally incompetent.*”⁽¹⁶⁾ In Iraq, the world's sole superpower has been the world's serial superbungler. (I've always wondered if the trope of the “sole superpower” serves any purpose other than teaching us how thin the line is between the sublime and the farcical.)

Whose fault? (The wrong question for a moral perspective—starting the war was the sin, not losing it—but the right one here.) Breathtaking as they were, the majestic vistas of Rumsfeld's ineptitude were little more than a convenient excuse for war advocates with egg on their faces. The grand whining parade has already begun, and mealy-mouthed apologists are being wheeled in on bloated floats to proffer lame excuses about inadequate troop levels, insufficient 4GW training, political fecklessness, etc. Eventually, the chest beating will die down as it always does, with the blame for the debacle pinned on the dirty antiwar hippies.

But hippies don't fight wars. The Pentagon does. It did, and it lost. One reason—not even the most important—is the military's endemic inability to win hearts and minds. Early in the war, the Guardian sounded the alarm:

“Senior British military officers on the ground are making it clear they are dismayed by the failure of US troops to try to fight the battle for hearts and minds. They also made plain they are appalled by reports over the weekend that US marines killed Iraqi civilians, including women and children, as they seized bridges outside Nassiriya in southern Iraq.”⁽¹⁷⁾

The emphasis on force protection is a far cry from past imperial practices. The Romans, Spaniards, British, French, and conquerors of yore seldom agonized over their own casualties. To their credit, Americans do. But this comes at a moral cost: US soldiers are brave but the casualty-averse military doctrine of their commanders is cowardly. That, in essence, is what Susan Sontag, Arundhati Roy, and Bill Maher said—right before the lynching began.^(18–20) In a similar show of disgust diplomatically stripped of the C-word, this British officer echoed the sentiment:

“US troops have the attitude of shoot first and ask questions later. They simply won't take any risk... Unfortunately, when we explained our rules of engagement which are based around the principle of minimum force, the US troops just laughed.”⁽²¹⁾

Lebanon and Somalia notwithstanding, the United States rarely cuts and runs. It did not in Vietnam. It fought to the death—of the other guy—and then cut and walked when victory proved elusive. Iraq is too central to US hegemonic fantasies to allow a speedy retreat: it'll be done cut-and-crawl style, with enough pit stops to admire the fireworks over Iran. Bush's playbook: (1) run out the clock; (2) anoint successor as “the dope who snatched defeat out of the jaws of victory and handed Iran the victor's crown”; (3) let the etching in the history books begin.

Could the invasion have succeeded? Not a chance. All the grousing about incompetent planning is the age-old excuse-making prattle of losers. Leave aside the not-so-trifling fact that the United States never had the proper DNA for empire (lite or otherwise). It is the incontrovertible reality of the 21st century that the time for the White Man's Burden has passed. Not only is the era of empire gone, but the days of the so-called liberal hegemonic order are numbered. Even before 9/11, the cumulative impact of European integration, the rise of Asian powers, and the resurgence of Muslim identity sounded the death knell for American hegemony. To hasten the burial will be one of Bush's legacies. Alas, incalculable misery in the Middle East, enduring anti-American hatred, and future terrorist attacks in London, Paris, and Seattle will be another one.

The same Madeleine Albright who called the United States “*the indispensable nation*”—presumably to avoid confusion with the dispensable ones—taunted Colin Powell with the wickedest double-entendre since Mae West: “*What's the point of having this superb military you're always talking about if we can't use it?*”⁽²²⁾ To paraphrase an old line, it is better for a big country to keep its superb army idle and let the world think it's not much of a superpower than to use it and remove all doubt.

Bush's neoconservative doctrine seeks to apply Straussian philosophy to the unfettered pursuit of US energy interests. Its unspoken motto: “perpetual war for perpetual peace.” The rough idea—and the idea is, indeed, rough—is to play this century's Great Game (first prize: control of Mideast oil supply) under the banner of national security. Until we whacked them on the head, Iraqis had never expressed much desire to attack us. To the lesser minds, therefore, the idea of fighting them there so we wouldn't have to fight them here always teetered on the edge of insanity. To the neocons' delight, 9/11 came to cleanse the public discourse of the yelpings of lesser minds.

And so, today, we gather to honor the superior minds, all of these men (they are mostly men) who so decisively turned out the lights on the American empire. Heading the roll call is none other than the Decider himself. If you're among the wise who chose to sit out the Bush years at the bottom of a well, you need to know only two things about the man: the first is that he is President of the United States; the second is that he said:

“*One of the hardest parts of my job is to connect Iraq to the war on terror.*”⁽²³⁾

To connect it to the war *for* terror would indeed be easier. A self-declared uniter, Bush is beginning to unite the country around the belief that he is the worst president in US history.⁽²⁴⁾ Whether his reelection, ipso facto, makes the electorate the dumbest ever is a logical inference that a political culture drunk with self-admiration will have trouble getting its woozy head around.

To call Team Bush a thundering herd of galloping loons is to be unnecessarily kind. For rarely has daftness been elevated to such a lofty plane of power and influence. The early days of the Iraq adventure set the tone. A year after Defense strategist Ken Adelman infamously called the coming liberation of Iraq a “cakewalk,” Paul Wolfowitz, then Rumsfeld's deputy, used the occasion of an interview with NPR's Melissa Block to stamp the prediction with the Pentagon's gold seal.

“We're seeing today how much the people of Poland and Central and Eastern Europe appreciate what the United States did to help liberate them from the tyranny of the Soviet Union. I think you're going to see even more of that sentiment in Iraq. There's not going to be the hostility that you described Saturday. There simply won't be.” ⁽²⁵⁾

Hostility? What an idea! On the eve of the war, in a vice presidential reprise of Tom Cruise's couch-hopping antics, Cheney stepped on the set of NBC's “Meet The Press” to share the love: *“We will, in fact, be greeted as liberators.”* ⁽²⁶⁾ For a mere \$44 billion a year, ⁽²⁷⁾ all we got from US intelligence was a silly update of an old movie script:

Renault: *And what in Heaven's name brought you to Baghdad?*
 Bush: *The sweets and the flowers. I came to Baghdad for love.*
 Renault: *Love! What love? We're in the Middle East.*
 Bush: *I was misinformed.*

Christmas 2003 came early in Iraq and WMD-stuffed stockings were spotted everywhere by late March. Or so Rumsfeld told ABC News' George Stephanopoulos: *“We know where they are. They're in the area around Tikrit and Baghdad and east, west, south and north somewhat.”* ⁽²⁸⁾ East, west, south and nowhere somewhat. In September of that year, the part-time AEI scholar, full-time slimeball Richard Perle got all his neurons firing at once to produce this marvel of crystal gazing:

“And a year from now, I'll be very surprised if there is not some grand square in Baghdad that is named after President Bush.” ⁽²⁹⁾

Or perhaps some grand morgue? Which naturally leads us to the 600-billion dollar question: where did they find these people? The answer: in that dank rodent house known as the American Enterprise Institute. Often found gnawing on the chicken wire, the rabid ferret Michael Ledeen needs no cage rattling to work himself into a froth of hysteria:

“Every ten years or so, the United States needs to pick up some small crappy little country and throw it against the wall, just to show the world we mean business.” ⁽³⁰⁾

In their knockoff of *Mein Kampf*, retitled *An End to Evil*, Richard Perle and former Bush speechwriter David Frum give voice to their full-blown dementia by recommending all-out attacks on anybody ever so slightly Muslim. Why? Because *“There is no middle way for Americans: It is victory or holocaust.”* ⁽³¹⁾ Salon's Gary Kamiya calls the Perle-Frum

worldview “*a strange combination of Hobbes and Popeye.*”⁽³²⁾ Harsh on Popeye. Me, I have no patience for moral midgets who've seen their Napoleonic hour arrive. Like Alexander in Gordium, I head straight for the deliciously obvious: to end evil, end Perle and Frum.

The American Enterprise Institute serves to mitigate the most glaring defects of our democracy. Take the current escalation in Iraq, for example. President Bush alone grasps the full cosmic immensity of its wisdom, even calling the idea a “surge” to convey its irresistibility. Alas, the Forces of Darkness, aka the Pentagon, the Congress, and the American public, will have none of it. Enter the AEI and its paunchy, double-chinned warmonger, Frederick W. Kagan. Faster than a chickenhawk can flap its wings, Kagan demothballs his fave retired general, Jack Keane, and whips up *The Surge*. Voilà. Rasputin would be proud.

*I*t would be unfair to let Team Bush steal all the credit for the imperial collapse without a tip of the hat to the White House Dictation Office, also known as the mainstream media (MSM). Skipping right over the miniskirted hyena Ann Coulter (a risky stunt but I've got my spiked pogo shoes on), the oafish junkie Rush Limbaugh, and the assortment of one-trick performing fleas hopping mad on the AM dial, I shall ascend Mount Olympus to gaze at the brainy stars of the MSM.

Few shine more brightly than Weekly Standard editor Bill Kristol, the supernova of the Murdoch empire—unless red dwarf is a tighter cosmic fit for someone known to his friends and pet hamster as “Dan Quayle's brain.” The day after the 9/11 attacks, the surrogate brain seized the moment and began pounding the war drums: “*There's a fair amount of evidence that Iraq had very close associations with Osama bin Laden in the past.*”⁽³³⁾ There was not a shred of evidence. A year later, Kristol nuzzled up to The New Republic's Lawrence F. Kaplan to break into a cakewalk jig on the National Review dance floor: “*Having defeated and then occupied Iraq, democratizing the country should not be too tall an order for the world's sole superpower.*”⁽³⁴⁾ Brilliance of this magnitude is Kristol's trademark. Time magazine took longer than most to realize that and only this month got around to adding Kristol to its roster of columnists.

Two influential Canadians with a nasty case of empire envy, Mark Steyn and Michael Ignatieff pulpiterated the good news—one from his stool at the Chicago Sun-Times, the other from his booster seat at the Harvard Kennedy School. From Steyn we learned that “*Imperialism is the answer*”⁽³⁵⁾ and from Ignatieff that “*The case for empire is that it has become, in a place like Iraq, the last hope for democracy and stability alike.*”⁽²⁾ (I don't know about you, but the dazzling acumen of the expert never fails to give me goosebumps!) Former TNR editor Andrew Sullivan, another heavy smoker of the imperialist's hookah pipe, found his knees wobbly after 9/11 and his left flank badly exposed: “*The decadent Left in its enclaves on the coasts is not dead—and may well mount what amounts to a fifth column.*”⁽³⁶⁾

Of course, no account of MSM malfeasance would be fitting without at least a passing glance at the yapping chihuahuas. Newsweek's Howard Fineman woofed a few choice words of his own: "*We had controversial wars that divided the country. This war united the country and brought the military back.*"⁽³⁷⁾ Well said, Howard. His colleague Chris Matthews yaks at such vertiginous speeds that his brain emits exotic particles of synchrotronic quirkiness. One month into the war, he blurted out, "*We're all neocons now.*" A few weeks later, Matthews highlighted a side of war that too often gets short shrift: what great, clean fun it is! "*Check it out. The women like this war! I think we like having a hero as our president.*"⁽³⁷⁾ Must a TV show be pornographic just because it's called "Hardball"?

The war has given the American mainstream media a brilliant opportunity to prove its essential worthlessness. It has shown itself to be little more than a circus of entertainers and cheerleaders for whom every season is the silly season. Tragically, the media has failed in its sacred duty to keep a vigilant, skeptical, critical eye on the centers of power. Who is the American Robert Fisk, Gideon Levy, or Amira Hass? Whoever they are (and Sy Hersh proves they exist), why are their writings not filling the op-ed pages of the great American newspapers? How can the nation that produces the bulk of Nobel prize winners be stuck with such a sullen bunch of journalistic mediocrities? The sycophantic enablers of the Fourth Estate have blood on their hands.

*T*he unfolding catastrophe in Iraq had a single cause: the reassertion of US hegemony after 9/11. Its trigger was a rare astral alignment. Big Oil, the neocons, the Christian fundamentalists, the liberal hawks, AIPAC, the MSM, and 9/11 all formed cosmic dots in the sky that only one power could—and did—successfully align: the president of the United States. No American leader has so much owned a war.

And none has so little owned up to it. Victors are never war criminals. That's because they get to write the history books. Bush won't have that chance. The die has been cast and the hour is too late for him or anyone to alter the unforgiving judgment of posterity. Therein, paradoxically, lies our quandary. For, if freedom is just another word for nothing left to lose, then Bush is a free man—free to pursue the most malignant policies, heedless of the consequences to his unworsenable presidential standing. Beware the desperation of a cornered man.

The apostle of imperial dominance, Bush slew the "last empire." The towering figure of our time, he is a piteously small man. The self-anointed emissary of a "higher father," he is servant to no power but himself. The captain of the sinking ship has laid his command upon his fellow Americans: "*Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for me.*" No sacrifice of life shall be too great, no damage to civil liberties too high, no expenses too vast for a vainglorious man deluded by fantastic dreams of redemption by force.

But who besides the bereaved will mourn? Who besides the orphan will whimper? Who besides the humiliated will stare back? Who besides the thugs and the craven will lead? Patriotism is a lovely thing. In its name, some go dying by the side of an Iraqi road in twitching agony; others go shopping in oversized automobiles festooned with yellow ribbons. We all play our part—and nobody else's.

Yeats bemoaned an era when the best lacked all conviction, while the worst were full of passionate intensity. Today, Kristol blusters and hectors, Cheney scolds and forebodes, Bush struts and smirks. Meanwhile, the giant, timid chorus listens politely to the deafening silence of the outraged—and the mad march of war goes on.



*“The pallor of girls' brows shall be their pall;
Their flowers the tenderness of patient minds,
And each slow dusk a drawing-down of blinds.”*
— Wilfred Owen

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