UR IMPERIALISM

Imperialism is a state of mind as much as it is a structure of domination. That truth is central to understanding the attitude of those who presume to impose their will on others, to run the affairs of alien people, to control what they may do and what they may not do. Thinking in this way of the varied phenomena that we label imperialism helps to clarify what they share and where they diverge. It allows making finer grained discriminations that are especially valuable when analyzing the recent behavior of the United States. For its serial interventions do not fit comfortably into categories borrowed from the past. America's self decreed spheres of domination do not constitute another Roman empire, a British Empire, a Russian Empire or in fact anything the world has seen before. Yet it does share with imperial powers of another day certain features. They are most pronounced in the mindset that is permissive of actions directed at taking charge of others without their approval.

1 **A strong sense of superiority** is the bedrock of the imperial mindset. It enables and it justifies imposing oneself on others. The ingredients of superiority are physical, political and moral. Psychologically, they reinforce each other. They also are fungible - to varying degrees. Military prowess, in making the practical tasks of occupation and coercion easier, feeds the 'we are better" syndrome while emboldening the nation to pursue audacious ambition. Being able to do something shifts the balance in judging whether we ought to do it. For it promises to confer success. One cannot imagine recent actions of the United States vis a vis Iraq or Afghanistan without assigning a crucial place to a military capacity assuring that we could work our will insofar as defeating opposing forces is concerned.

Political superiority manifests itself in two ways: as the factor that makes possible the projection of military power, and in the conviction that "we" can actually improve the life of the natives by providing them with the order and 'enlightened' institutions which they themselves are unable to provide. That supposed inability is manifest (a) in their very incapacity to resist us, and, (b) in the internal conditions that allow things to happen that vex us, e.g. harbors for terrorists to plot attacks, drug dealers to operate, or pirates to raid.

Moral superiority is integral to the mix, especially for those who prize their self designated virtue – and see themselves as having a selfless interest in promoting it in other lands. These days that is a critical element. It has been true to a lesser extent since the Enlightenment – thus France's 'mission civilisatrice' and Britain's vain belief in advancing the cause of progress on all fronts. A keen sense of being a 'good' people concerned about uplifting others salves consciences, erases doubts and permits using dubious means to accomplish supposedly worthy ends. The names Washington gives to its military actions express that feeling: Operation Iraqi Freedom, Operation Enduring Freedom. This convenient perspective paves the way, of course, for the routinization of hypocrisy. It legitimizes oppressive means that would be deemed intolerable if visited upon us, and it masks selfish aims and purposes.

2. For the imperial mind, **the immediate reason** for intervention can be insignificant relative to the response. The incident **stimulates what is a strong predisposition**. In some instances, it serves merely as an excuse: "Remember the Maine," the Bey of Algiers' flyswatter that brushed the face of the French envoy; a Chinese governor's crackdown on opium trafficking; the phantom Tonkin Gulf attack; Saddam's foot-dragging about allowing United Nations' inspectors unimpeded access to all Iraqi facilities. At other times, there may be a serious provocation, 9/11 triggering the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan. In all these cases, the imperial actor is already programmed to act aggressively and to disregard possible ensuing complications – diplomatic or military.

3. The imperial mindset is **comfortable with taking charge of other peoples**. Doing so is not felt as odd or improper. Controlling and giving direction to the 'natives' is, in fact, praiseworthy insofar as it carries the promise of their betterment, as well as for oneself. The contemporary term for that is "nation-building' – although a pre-existing nation and/or state may be in place but whose leadership and political coloration we dislike. Human rights abuses and poor economic conditions are taken as both evidence of the current regime's dereliction and a justification for intervention. Imperialist thinking arrogates to itself the right to make that judgment according to its own lights. That was the logic of the American actions in Cuba, the Philippines, multiple Caribbean countries and more recently in the Islamic world.

The decision to intervene is viewed as the competent/virtuous nation's alone. It requires no higher authority since none is recognized or deemed qualified. Good intentions create their own legitimacy. These days, there is some sensitivity to legitimacy. So it is desirable to have partners who serve as auxiliaries to the enterprise. Their presence masks the truth of it being in essence a unilateral action. The formal laying on of hands by a collective security organization has practical advantages, too, even if it comes after the fact. But, in principle, the 'world community' in any guise has no rightful place in making key determinations. The United State was not dissuaded from invading Iraq despite the Security Council's unwillingness to give permission. Ur imperialists know best, and know that they know best.

Similarly, it is unnecessary to get the prior approval of the people being subjugated. After all, if they both knew what their own enlightened interests were and were free to express them, the occasion for the intervention would not have arisen. Dictatorships, especially hostile ones, lower the threshold for intervention since they are seen as preventing the latter condition from being met. *Post hoc* approval by the natives is inferred from their participation in whatever governing mechanisms are put in place; even acquiescence is interpreted as confirming the occupier's righteousness and as bestowing legitimacy. The extremity of this conceit was manifest in Washington's labeling the Iraqi insurgents "Anti-Iraqi Forces." It also was implicit in Joe Biden's walking away from his dinner in Ahmed Karzai's presidential palace launching verbal barbs in a flurry of Parthian shots. Unannounced visits by American dignitaries reflect the same attitude.

4. **An absence of empathy** for the locals and a consonant dulling of sensibilities about the duress they experience is integral to the imperial personality. Cultural knowledge is sought only on instrumental terms. It is extracted and processed as just another kind of information. To develop an understanding of the natives sufficient to allow for identification with them is to threaten the innate feelings of superiority and perhaps to heighten the awareness of being an alien intruder. That is why, nowadays, there is a preference for using "native" interpreters and home-grown experts as tag-ons in performing occupation missions.

Lack of cultural preparation may also be represented as a sign that there is no intention of being a long-term occupier. A sign to the locals, to outside parties and to whomever looks askance as declarations that there is no imperial intent or purpose. At the same time, containing empathy is a way of avoiding inhibition about the use of violence. For it allows a degree of depersonalization of the civilian casualties that are an inescapable accompaniment to military action. Guilt and inhibition about committing unsavory acts are muted when dealing with a depersonalized 'them' rather than actual persons whose character and individuality emerges from a known socio-cultural context. Vulgar epithets fit this psychology: e.g. rag-heads or hajis.

Depersonalization of the locals is evident as well in the devaluation of deaths and casualties. The fixation solely with one's own losses continues in the *post-mortems*. Hence, the so-called "balance-sheets" drawn of the United States' Iraqi enterprise slight the devastating price paid by the Iraqi populace in general.

5. The **imperial state of mind is strengthened by being a collective phenomenon**. Emotions play a bigger role than does deliberate thought in justifying, sustaining and then whitewashing an intervention. This is particularly important in countries where invasion and occupation go against the grain of national self-image. A threshold of initial intensity must be crossed to fuel passions that can override habit and inhibition. 9/11 did exactly that. By providing both motivation and a blanket justification for whatever is done, that permits the imperial mindset can grow and sustain itself whatever happens 'out there.' Emotions of this kind have the further effect of silencing and/or ignoring critics who may bring to the fore uncomfortable facts. In other words, group think and implicit group censorship go hand-in-hand. Selective perception thereby becomes a constant in the imperial mind set.

'Imperial' behavior generates momentum that is as much mental as it is political or organizational. One gets accustomed to doing certain things that may have seemed disagreeable if not unnatural at the outset. The second and third times become instinctively easier. This holds even where the first intervention/occupation has been anything but an unalloyed success. The

accommodating attitudes become routinized as inertia of all kinds carries the process forward. The imperial mentality feeds on itself just as one intervention creates a military *cum* political dynamic that impels a nation towards subsequent interventions. We saw this in round II of the Afghan intervention when attention diverted to Iraq returned. The same dubious methods (stress on kinetic action, unfocused attacks producing collateral damage); the same absence of strategic design (when will we know success?: "we'll recognize it when we see it"); the same lack of candor in communicating goals and acknowledging trade-offs; and the same moral compromises were made despite the painful failures and high costs registered in Iraq.

6. A companion feature of the imperial mentality is its **susceptibility to becoming prisoner of expectations.** To set down the path of imposing oneself on others is to make a bet on success. For the stake is not only the stated objective but all that has been invested in the project. Beyond resources - human, financial, diplomatic –there is collective self esteem. There is the collectivity's sense of moral worth. This last figures prominently in the mentality of a liberal democratic society that cultivates the idea of its intrinsic goodness. To come up short (much less fail outright) is bad enough. To make hostage to that failure something that one supposedly cherishes is to court a crisis of self doubt and plunging morale. Paradoxically, plowing ahead can put off that day of reckoning by keeping regrets at bay– for a time. This is so even where the ultimate consequences are more deleterious due to such mindless inertia.

7. The **imperial personality is highly judgmental**. It is free and easy with criticism of the 'natives'. The typical mode of address is to instruct, to lecture, to correct, to remonstrate, to scold and, if necessary, to coerce. The underlying sense of superiority means that if something goes badly, then 'they' have to be at fault – for one reason or another. To admit error, much less to apologize for it, is to undercut that image of superiority. Giving oneself license to treat the natives as subordinates is a way of defending the core premise that I have a right to take custody of you. Acceptance of equality on any plane is incompatible with the imperial mindset. Hence the importance placed on segregated, self contained residential compounds.

8. **Rebellion** against invasion/occupation **is neither authentic nor valid to the imperialist**

mind. It is be denounced and repressed. The more serious the rebellion, the stronger the impulse to cast its members as evil-doers. This line of thinking/feeling flows from the justification for the intervention relied on in the first place. To acknowledge that rebels have any fair reason to turn on their occupiers is to call into question the legitimacy of what the dominant party is doing.

Moreover, rejection is labeled ingratitude. This reaction is in direct proportion to the extent to which the occupation is described as benevolent and in the best interest of the 'natives'. That explains why the charge of ingratitude is so heavily freighted these days. It is not an entirely novel phenomenon, as a perusal of the graphic portraits of diabolical Sepoy rebels drawn in British journals makes stunningly clear.

9. Since the aims and methods of the enterprise are declared unimpeachable, since the advertised end is to improve life for the locals, the **attempt by any other outside party to exercise influence is by its very nature condemned** as offensive, pernicious and hostile. That logic was applied to Iran's connections with leading Shi'ite politicians in Iraq. American officials were not at all conscious of contradiction between their presence as an occupying power at a distance of 6,000 miles and their righteous denunciations of neighboring Iran's intervention in Iraq's sovereign affairs – however indirect and/or by invitation.

Conclusion

Whatever label we choose to describe the American sense of national self and attitude toward others, it is instructive to take cognizance of what is shared with other powers that exercised global predominance. Admittedly, that carries us only so far – and not only because circumstances differ in important respects. Geopolitical strategy cannot be separated from the workings of the collective American psyche. To probe where we are as a nation, and what will be required of us were we to reconsider our purpose and place in the world, the imperative need is coming to grips with our collective identity. To put it succinctly: is national and individual self esteem so rooted in the belief of American exceptionalism and superiority that it would be fatally impaired by acknowledging our ordinariness? and, does the sense of being a nonpareil people necessitate global preeminence?