American Empire and the End of the Nation-State

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Robert MacFarlane, National Security Adviser to President Ronald Reagan, stated at a recent round-table discussion on transatlantic relations at the Library of Congress that he saw a development toward the end of the nation-state. He was struck by the tendency in the European Union, and simultaneously among the member states of the United Nations, of giving up their sovereignty to participate in a broader political organization and a preference for the rule of majority in those institutions. MacFarlane did not see this as a positive development. He does not trust supranational organizations.

When seen from MacFarlane’s perspective, the unilateral policies of the Bush administration are a clear effort to avoid the end of the United States as a nation-state. MacFarlane’s concern may be surprising to many people, since the contemporary debate on the United States is defined by the concept of “American Empire,” in other words an expanding state, not one that is merely defending itself against international developments that it perceives as inimical. MacFarlane’s take on the idea of “the end of the nation-state” is also different from the way that this topic was discussed some five years ago, when it was more about the failing powers of central government within states.

It seems that concepts of “American Empire” and “end of the nation-state” are used with ease, and often without any clear definitions, in public debate. American political culture, with its typical characteristics, is to a large extent ignored in this debate as well. This leads to a lively discussion, of limited use, on important topics.

American Hegemony

It is clear that the United States has a dominant position in many fields and on a global scale. American defense spending represents almost half of the world’s military expenditure, and the United States spends more than the next fifteen to twenty biggest spenders combined. On military research and development (R&D) alone, the United States spends three times more than the next six powers combined, or in others words, the American military R&D budget is higher than the total defense budget of Germany or the United Kingdom. As has been pointed out: “The United States has overwhelming nuclear superiority, the world’s dominant air force, the only true bluewater navy, and a unique capability to project power around the globe.”

Yet the United States is not only powerful in the military field. The British weekly The Economist states that, “The United States is by far the world’s leading economic power.” America’s Gross Domestic Product measured around US$ 10.2 trillion in 2001 – about three times the size of Japan’s output, almost five times the size of Germany’s and more than seven times the size of that of the UK. California’s economy alone is the fifth largest in the world, ahead of France and just behind the United Kingdom, and almost seven times that of Austria. Economic power also translates into dominance in other fields. The English language has become the international lingua franca. Most of us have to deal with Microsoft software on a daily basis. American movies bring in about 85 percent of the box office revenue in Europe, and more than 80 percent worldwide. 72 percent of television dramas exported worldwide originated in the United States, with ‘Baywatch’ the most watched TV program in the world. As President Bush’s latest National Security Strategy put it: “Today, the United States enjoys a position of unparalleled military strength and great economic and political influence.”
An American Empire?

This dominance of the United States in so many fields, in combination with the unilateral policies of the Bush administration and the military occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq, led to questions about a possible American Empire. This debate is quite bewildering. It is striking that most authors do not offer a definition of the concept “Empire.” There are two basic approaches to this topic: one stresses cultural and economic dominance; and the other focuses on political and military aspects.

When it concerns politics and military forces, most analysts focus on the intentions of the United States and on their own response to those assumed intentions. In his book *American Empire*, Andrew Bacevich, a former US Army officer and now Professor of International Relations at Boston University, invokes Charles Beard and William Appleman Williams and concludes that since the end of the nineteenth century, the United States has pursued a consistent imperial strategy. The author Max Boot agrees with Bacevich, but does not see this strategy as problematic, since he wrote: “... on the whole, US imperialism has been the greatest force for good in the world during the past century.”

Even before the recent problems in Iraq raised concern about the state of the American Empire, other authors had expressed their doubts about the commitment to an Empire by Americans. Michael Ignatieff, Professor for Human Rights Policy at Harvard University, offered in his study *Empire Lite* the following definition of American imperialism:

> [It] is an imperialism led by a people who remember that their country secured its independence by revolt against an empire, and who have often thought of their country as the friend of anti-imperial struggles everywhere. It is an empire, in other words, without consciousness of itself as such. But that does not make it any less of an empire, that is, an attempt to permanently order the world of states and markets to its national interests.

Historian Niall Ferguson also believes that there is after all an American Empire, which he calls “an Empire in denial.” According to him, the United States is an imperial power, but one lacking commitment beyond short-termed military interventions or a willingness to create civil administrations in occupied territories. Ferguson finds this denial of power “a real danger to the world.”

Others deny the existence of an American Empire. To them the United States might be a superpower, but American political behavior is in their view different from imperial conduct. As columnist Charles Krauthammer put it: “No Thousand Year Reich. No New Soviet Man. […] Indeed, America is the first hegemonic power in history to be obsessed with ‘exit strategies.’ It could not wait to get out of Haiti and Somalia; it would get out of Kosovo and Bosnia today if it could.”

All of these deliberations on American imperialism are reflected in the debate on the present occupation of Iraq. The United States has the capabilities to fight and win a major war far from home. The stated goal is regime change and a relatively short military occupation of Iraq. Yet there is also general criticism that the occupation of Iraq was not seriously prepared by the US Department of Defense and that there is a lack of commitment by the Bush administration for a prolonged presence in Iraq. Original estimates for the duration of an
American military occupation ranged from three months (by Jay Gardner, the first Proconsul of Iraq) to at the most two years (by Paul Wolfowitz, Under-Secretary of Defense). With what seemed to become a longer-lasting occupation, an earlier installment of a new Iraqi regime has now been decided upon. If prolonged military presence abroad and the ability to install a new regime without much opposition are characteristics of imperialism, the policies of the Bush administration fall short of this mark. Although the United States has a worldwide presence, it seems harder and harder to enforce enduring changes in regimes and societies.

Nevertheless, after the Second World War American administrations were able to change Germany and Japan profoundly and made them into allies, at least most of the time. Simultaneously, there has been a global US military presence since 1945. Is this change in American success a temporal setback, is it a consequence of typical Bush administration policies, or has it anything to do with “imperial overstretch” or “the end of the nation-state”?

Cultural and Economic Dominance and their Limits

Some academics suggest that real power lies not so much in political and military hegemony but in economic and cultural dominance. In general, the assumption from the perspective of economic dominance is that the United States is in decline. Immanuel Wallerstein, a senior research scholar at Yale University, is convinced that the United States has been in decline since it abandoned the Bretton Woods system in 1971 as a consequence of the costs of the Vietnam War. Wallerstein sees the contemporary military interventions as accelerating the decline of the United States.\textsuperscript{11}

Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri agree to some extent with Wallerstein in their study \textit{Empire}. In their different and much more confusing argument they also see the fall of an American Empire. Confusion arises because, for one, it is not clear what would be the role of the United States in this “Empire”. At one point they say that the United States is the central power of the modern world,\textsuperscript{12} but at another point they state: “The coming Empire is not American and the United States is not its center.”\textsuperscript{13}

Hardt and Negri do connect the idea of American Empire to globalization. Globalization has, of course, become another key concept in recent years, just as empire has. Globalization is seen as the emergence of a global culture, made possible by modern means of communication, notably the Internet, and an increasingly international economy. Often the major theme in discussions of globalization involves the contradictions between a modern international culture and local traditional cultures, as expressed in Thomas Friedman’s \textit{The Lexus and the Olive Tree} and Benjamin Barber’s \textit{Jihad Versus McWorld}. American companies, from McDonalds to Microsoft, play an important role in this globalization. Yet it would be a mistake to suggest that globalization and Americanization are the same. Often the new technologies that contribute to globalization are part of a modernization that is not necessarily American – for instance, new technologies often originate in Asia or Europe. It would be incorrect to speak of dominance by American companies. For example, seven companies dominate in the global media and communications market, and all of these companies are to a large extent international organizations, but only three of them are American: Disney; Time Warner; and Viacom. The other four originate in different countries: Sony in Japan; Vivendi in France; Bertelsmann in Germany; and News Corporation in the United Kingdom.

David Rothkopf, Managing Director at Kissinger Associates and a professor at Columbia University, has argued that globalization and its “homogenizing influences” are positive. In his view, globalization promotes integration and is “a vital step toward both a more stable world and better lives for the people in it.”\textsuperscript{14} Others, like Robert McChesney of the University of Illinois, see the monopolization of media by seven companies as an anti-democratic rule by commercial interests.\textsuperscript{15} Whatever one’s position, it is important to note that in the case of
perceived economic and cultural dominance, the role of businesses and international companies is crucial and that national governments have limited input.

The importance of the values that are expressed through the media is crucial to all arguments. Joseph S. Nye Jr, Dean of the Harvard Kennedy School of Government and former Assistant Secretary of Defense in the Clinton administration, has introduced the concept of “soft” power in international relations, in contrast to the “hard” power of military and economic power. Nye argues that a nation is at the height of its power when it entices other nations or individuals to follow its examples and ideas, without using military or economic power to enforce its leadership. This can be achieved through exemplary behavior, or through the propagation of values that are part of the powerful society. Those values can be expressed through its cultural products, for example movies, music, and television programs. This explains in part why the debates on American cultural imperialism have been so heated.

Yet the general conclusion is that when American companies try to sell their goods abroad, they have to adapt to the local market. Globalization turns into “glocalization.” This is true for companies like McDonald’s, which introduces all kinds of specific products for the local market, such as the salmon burger in Norway next to its Big Mac, insalata caprese in Italy next to French fries, beer and mineral water in France next to American soft drinks, and “our” famous McKroket in the Netherlands. Other American companies have had similar experiences: Kellogg changed to unsugared raisins in its Raisin Bran; Froot Loops banished the green loops because Europeans thought they looked “artificial;” and Kraft added lemons, eggs, or mustard to its mayonnaise, depending on the tastes of its customers in various European countries.

A company such as the Disney Corporation also had to adapt to the European market when it wanted (then) EuroDisney to survive. On top of that, Disney tries to attract as many customers as possible. Consequently, the values that are expressed in Disney movies must be acceptable to everyone around the world, or, if one wants to be critical, must be rather generic. The values that are stressed are Fun, Fantasy, Happiness, Good over Evil, Magic, Love/Romance, Imagination, and Family. These values are typical for Disney products, and they also seem to be acceptable on a global scale.

Even though American companies are prominent worldwide, and are especially present in television programs and movies, in the economic and cultural fields there are definitely limits to American dominance. The general trend is more of adaptation to local culture, both in products and in values expressed through the products.

**Imperial Overstretch and the End of the Nation-State**

Not too long ago, the fashionable perception of the United States was that of a power in decline. This point of view was introduced by historian Paul Kennedy in his influential 1987 study *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*. Last year Kennedy revoked his words. In his new analysis, not only has the United States remained Number One, it has become incomparable to any other power, contemporary or historical. As he wrote: “Nothing has ever existed like this disparity of power; nothing. … Charlemagne’s empire was merely Western European in its reach. The Roman Empire stretched farther afield, but there was another great empire in Persia, and a larger one in China. There is, therefore, no comparison.” On top of that, Kennedy noted, American military dominance is achieved at the relatively low cost of only 3.2 percent of its Gross Domestic Product, and he concluded: “Being Number One at great cost is one thing; being the world’s single superpower on the cheap is astonishing.” Yet even though Kennedy was right in his observations last year, his original concerns have recently been aired again. The increasing budget deficit created by the Bush administration creates new worries about the state of the American economy.
Not even five years ago was “the end of the nation-state,” as presented in Martin van Creveld’s book *The Rise and Decline of the State*, the leading topic of interest.\(^\text{18}\) At the end of the Cold War, nations fell apart, for example the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, Somalia, and Rwanda. Ethnic conflicts were rampant, as Daniel Patrick Moynihan warned in his book *Pandaemonium*. Western nations began to decentralize their governments. Another phenomenon was the increasing role of private armies, with colorful names such as Military Professional Resources, Inc., Sandline International, and Executive Outcomes. Simultaneously, in the United States the militia movement with its anti-government ideology and the Oklahoma City bombing by Timothy McVeigh contributed to the idea that the end of the nation-state was near.

In recent times similar events have taken place. It could be argued that al-Qaeda, as an international terrorist organization with an ideological goal, also represents the idea of “the end of the nation-state.” Private armies are still active. One of my recent “favorite” private armies is Archangel Corp., based in Colorado, which is fighting in the civil war in Sudan, and paid for by the Swiss-based non-governmental organization (NGO) Christian Solidarity International. Christian Solidarity International cooperates with American NGOs such as Voice of the Martyrs and Samaritan’s Purse. These organizations are trying to subvert the US government-supported peace plan for Sudan.\(^\text{19}\) This is an example not of MacFarlane’s view of the end of the nation-state, but that of Van Creveld. These NGOs undermine state authority.\(^\text{”}\)

To which extent do NGOs signal a loss in state authority? There is a rich tradition of all kinds of NGOs in American society. Just to name a few famous examples of individual well-doers, NGOs have been founded by people from Andrew Carnegie, who created the Carnegie Endowment of Peace (and funded the building of the Peace Palace in The Hague), to the Rockefeller and Ford Foundations, to recent activities by George Soros, Bill Gates, and Ted Turner, who through their own foundations spend tens of millions of dollars on all kinds of international projects. Far from being comprehensive on the topic of NGOs, I would like to make the point that these efforts share a tradition of private initiative that exists to a large extent independent of national governments (and sometimes is meant as a critique of national government policies). These individual projects are a part of American history and political culture.

An example of American domestic politics undercutting the power of the nation state is the movement for tax cuts. The idea behind this movement is not simply a tax refund or a decrease in taxes as President Bush has already carried out. Grover Norquist, President of Americans for Tax Reform, has made it his goal to contribute to creating a smaller government. As he stated: “I don't want to abolish government. I simply want to reduce it to the size where I can drag it into the bathroom and drown it in the bathtub.”\(^\text{20}\) Although George Bush is not as extreme in his tax policies, it is striking that he and his fellow Republicans, with their dislike of “big government,” now use “the imperial Presidency” as a counterforce to centralized and federal government. Another example of this approach is “faith-based initiatives,” in which religious organizations, instead of government institutions, are used to execute social policies.

**Fashionable Statements or Shifting Paradigms?**

Since “9/11” and the American reaction, it is fashionable to speak of an “American Empire.” The concept of “Empire” is, however, hard to use seriously in a discussion of American foreign policy, as has become clear from the debates about economic dominance and local culture. On top of that, in the war on terrorism, there is an internal contradiction as well. Unilateral behavior by the Bush administration does not go well with the necessity for cooperation with other nations to track down terrorist networks. US armed forces are trained...
to win wars, but have problems in winning the peace, making continuing influence unlikely. At least as important are the domestic limitations on an "American Empire," ranging from a Republican Congress that wants lower taxes and limited government to traditional isolationists, on the one hand, and committed multilateralists, on the other.

Yet the military, political, economic, and cultural dominance of the United States suggests a strong American state. Since the September 11 2001 attacks, the militia movement in the United States has declined in importance, while national defense increased in importance. This would suggest that the theory of "the end of nation-state" is not completely valid either.

It seems that debates on concepts such as "American Empire" and "the end of the nation state" are being conducted in terms that are too generic. In the case of the United States, vivid traditions such as individual initiatives for reform policies, the establishment of NGOs and the distrust of especially the federal government complicate serious analysis. These traditions have been present throughout most of the United States' history. As a consequence the American state has never been as centralized or strong as the French or the Russian state, to name just two examples. The United States has an ideology based on distrust of power and powerful people, which, for domestic reasons, would make the emergence of an empire highly unlikely.

From the perspective of American domestic political history, MacFarlane’s concern about supranational organizations and the end of the nation state gets a different meaning as well. From its founding onward, the United States have been defined in part by the relationship of the rights of individuals, state rights, and the power of the federal government. Considerations on majority votes in international organizations thus go to the heart of American politics – a notion of which we Europeans should be more aware.

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Notes

10. Victor Davis Hanson, "What Empire?," *The Imperial Tense*, p. 153.