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Imperial Amnesia

By John B. Judis

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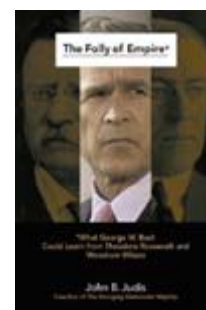
The United States invaded a distant country to share the blessings of democracy. But after being welcomed as liberators, U.S. troops encountered a bloody insurrection. Sound familiar? Don't think Iraq—think the Philippines and Mexico decades ago. U.S. President George W. Bush and his advisors have embarked on a historic mission to change the world. Too bad they ignored the lessons of history.

On October 18, 2003, U.S. President George W. Bush landed in Manila as part of a six-nation Asian tour. The presidential airplane, Air Force One, was shepherded into Philippine airspace by F-15 fighter jets due to security concerns over a possible terrorist attack. Bush's speech to the Philippine Congress was delayed by what one reporter described as “undulating throngs of protestors that lined his motorcade route past shantytowns and rows of shacks.” Outside the Philippine House of Representatives, several thousand more demonstrators greeted Bush, and several Philippine legislators staged a walkout during his 20-minute address.

In that speech, Bush credited the United States for transforming the Philippines into a democracy. “America is proud of its part in the great story of the Filipino people,” said Bush. “Together our soldiers liberated the Philippines from colonial rule.” He drew an analogy between the United States' attempt to create democracy in the Philippines and its effort to create a democratic Middle East through the invasion and occupation of Iraq. “Democracy always has skeptics,” the president said. “Some say the culture of the Middle East will not sustain the institutions of democracy. The same doubts were once expressed about the culture of Asia. These doubts were proven wrong nearly six decades ago, when the Republic of the Philippines became the first democratic nation in Asia.”

As many Philippine commentators remarked afterward, Bush's rendition of Philippine-American history bore little relation to fact. True, the U.S. Navy ousted Spain from the Philippines in the Spanish-American War of 1898. But instead of creating a Philippine democracy, the McKinley administration, its confidence inflated by victory in that “splendid little war,” annexed the country and installed a colonial administrator. The United States then waged a brutal war against the same Philippine independence movement it encouraged to fight against Spain. The war dragged on for 14 years. Before it ended, about 120,000 U.S. troops were deployed, more than 4,000 were killed, and more than 200,000 Filipino civilians and soldiers were killed. Resentment lingered a century later during Bush's visit.

As for the Philippines' democracy, the United States can take little credit for what exists and some blame for what doesn't. The electoral machinery the United States designed in 1946 provided a democratic veneer beneath which a handful of families, allied to U.S. investors—and addicted to kickbacks—controlled the Philippine



This article is an excerpt from the *The Folly of Empire* by John Judis. [Order the book from Amazon now.](#)

land, economy, and society. The tenuous system broke down in 1973 when Philippine politician Ferdinand Marcos had himself declared president for life. Marcos was finally overthrown in 1986, but even today Philippine democracy remains more dream than reality. Three months before Bush's visit, a group of soldiers staged a mutiny that raised fears of a military coup. With Islamic radicals and communists roaming the countryside, the Philippines is perhaps the least stable of Asian nations. If the analogy between the United States' "liberation" of the Philippines and of Iraq holds true, it will not be to the credit of the Bush administration, but to the skeptics who charged that the White House undertook the invasion of Baghdad with its eyes wide shut.

Politicians often rewrite history to their own purposes, but, as Bush's remarks suggested, there was more than passing significance to his revisionist account of the Spanish-American War. It reflected not just a distorted view of a critical episode in U.S. foreign policy but the rejection of important, negative lessons that Americans later drew from their brief experiment in creating an overseas empire. The United States' decision to invade and occupy Iraq wasn't, of course, a direct result of this misreading of the past. If Bush or Vice President Dick Cheney or Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz (the administration's leading neoconservative) had remembered the brutal war the United States fought in the Philippines or similar misadventures in Mexico, or the blighted history of Western imperialism in the Middle East, they still might have invaded Iraq. But they also might have had second, third, or even fourth thoughts about what Bush, unconsciously echoing the imperialists of a century ago, called a "historic opportunity to change the world."

Divine Interventionism

Prior to the annexation of the Philippines, the United States stood firmly against countries acquiring overseas colonies, just as American colonists once opposed Britain's attempt to rule them. But by taking over parts of the Spanish empire, the United States became the kind of imperial power it once denounced. It was now vying with Britain, France, Germany, Russia, and Japan for what future U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt called "the domination of the world."

Some Americans argued the country needed colonies to bolster its military power or to find markets for its capital. But proponents of imperialism, including Protestant missionaries, also viewed overseas expansion through the prism of the country's evangelical tradition. Through annexation, they insisted, the United States would transform other nations into communities that shared America's political and social values and also its religious beliefs. "Territory sometimes comes to us when we go to war in a holy cause," U.S. President William McKinley said of the Philippines in October 1900, "and whenever it does the banner of liberty will float over it and bring, I trust, the blessings and benefits to all people." This conviction was echoed by a prominent historian who would soon become president of Princeton University. In 1901, Woodrow Wilson wrote in defense of the annexation of the Philippines: "The East is to be opened and transformed, whether we will or no; the standards of the West are to be imposed upon it; nations and peoples which have stood still the centuries through are to be quickened and to be made part of the universal world of commerce and of ideas which has so steadily been a-making by the advance of European power from age to age."

The two presidents who discovered that the U.S. experiment with imperialism wasn't working were, ironically, Wilson and Theodore Roosevelt. Roosevelt had been an enthusiastic supporter of the U.S. takeover of the Spanish empire. "[I]f we do our duty aright in the Philippines," he declared in 1899, "we will add to that national renown which is the highest and finest part of national life, will greatly benefit the people of the Philippine Islands, and above all, we will play our part well in the great work of uplifting mankind." Yet, after Roosevelt became president in 1901, his enthusiasm for overseas expansion waned. Urged by imperialists to take over the Dominican Republic, he quipped, "As for



annexing the island, I have about the same desire to annex it as a gorged boa constrictor might have to swallow a porcupine wrong-end-to.” Under Roosevelt, U.S. colonial holdings shrunk. And after the Russo-Japanese War in 1904–05, Roosevelt changed the United States' diplomatic posture from competitor with the other imperialist powers to mediator in their growing conflicts.

Epilogue: Flag-draped coffins of U.S. soldiers returning from Mexico in 1914 (above); and Iraq in 2004 (below)
 Courtesy of the National Archives

Upon becoming president, Wilson boasted that he could “teach the South American republics to elect good men.” After Mexican Gen. Victoriano Huerta arranged the assassination of the democratically elected President Francisco Madero and seized power in February 1913, Wilson promised to unseat the unpopular dictator, using a flimsy pretext to dispatch troops across the border. But instead of being greeted as liberators, the U.S. forces encountered stiff resistance and inspired riots and demonstrations, uniting Huerta with his political opponents. In Mexico City, schoolchildren chanted, “Death to the Gringos.” U.S.-owned stores and businesses in Mexico had to close. The Mexico City newspaper *El Imparcial* declared, in a decidedly partial manner, “The soil of the patria is defiled by foreign invasion! We may die, but let us kill!” Wilson learned the hard way that attempts to instill U.S.-style constitutional democracy and capitalism through force were destined to fail.



Courtesy of thememoryhole.org

Wilson drew even more dramatic conclusions about imperialism from the outbreak of the First World War. Like Roosevelt, and many European leaders, Wilson earnestly believed that the rapid spread of imperialism contributed to a higher, more pacific civilization by bringing not only capitalist industry but also higher standards of morality and education to formerly barbarous regions. Sadly, the opposite occurred: The struggle for colonies helped precipitate a savage war among the imperial powers. The only way to prevent future war, Wilson concluded, was to dismantle the colonial structure itself. His plan included self-determination for former colonies, international arms reduction, an open trading system to discourage economic imperialism, and a commitment to collective security through international organizations, what is now sometimes referred to as multilateralism. Wilson never abandoned the evangelical goal of transforming the world, but he recognized that the United States could not do it alone, and it could not succeed overnight—alone or with others. Creating a democratic world could take decades, even centuries, as countries developed at their own pace and according to their own traditions.

After the First World War, Wilson failed to convince either the other victorious powers or the U.S. Senate to embrace his plan for a new world order. During World War II, President Franklin Roosevelt resumed Wilson's attempt to dismantle imperialism. After the war, though, the British and French refused to give up their holdings, and the Soviet Union restored and expanded the older czarist empire in Eastern Europe and Southern and Western Asia. Imperialism endured during the Cold War, but as a subtext of the struggle between the free world and communism.

The Cold War also shaped and distorted the United States' reaction to the powerful movements against imperialism emerging after the Second World War. Fearing that anticolonial movements would side with the Soviet Union, the United States abandoned its effort to dismantle European imperialism, most notably in Southeast Asia, and even sought to establish its own neo-imperial reign in Latin America, Asia, and the Middle East. The United States did not annex countries. Instead, as it did in Cuba in the early 20th century, Washington sought to dominate these countries' economies and keep friendly governments in power—through quiet subversion or, if necessary, outright military intervention.

The United States' support for ongoing imperial rule led to continuous unrest in the Caribbean and Central America and to disaster in the former French Indochina. The failure to dismantle imperialism was also keenly

felt in the Middle East. Since the early 20th century, the great powers had sought control of the region's oil fields. They initially attempted colonization in such countries as Iraq, but failing that, they won favorable long-term leases on the oil fields from pliant governments. In the latter half of the 20th century, the United States continued that pattern. In Iran, for instance, the CIA helped overthrow Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadeq in 1953 in order to restore and sustain the rule of the shah, whom the British installed in 1941. Throughout the region, the United States was considered Britain's imperial successor—a notion reinforced by U.S. support of Israel, which was perceived as an offshoot of European imperialism. (And, after the Six Day War in 1967, Israel itself became an occupying power.) This view of the United States would persist into the next century and frustrate the current Bush administration's efforts to remake the region.

Caveat Imperator

With the Cold War over, U.S. Presidents George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton had the chance to resume Wilson's attempt to dismantle the structure of imperialism that sparked two world wars, the Cold War, and wars of national liberation in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. As both presidents understood, the challenge concerned how the United States could actively exercise leadership—and further America's goals of a peaceful, democratic world—without reviving the perilous dialectic of imperialism and nationalism.

George H.W. Bush met this challenge when Iraq invaded Kuwait in August 1990. If he had acted unilaterally against Iraqi President Saddam Hussein—or solely with Britain, the other former colonial power in the region—the United States would have been regarded as an imperialist aggressor. But Bush wisely sought the support of the United Nations Security Council and created a genuine coalition that included Iraq's Arab neighbors.

Clinton followed a similar strategy. In the Balkans, where the collapse of the Soviet empire awakened centuries-old ethnic conflicts, Clinton intervened only as part of a NATO force.

These years represented a triumph of Wilsonianism. Yet, during this period, conservative Republicans challenged Wilson's legacy. The most vocal dissenters included the second and third generation of the neoconservatives who had helped shape U.S. President Ronald Reagan's domestic and foreign policy. They declared their admiration for the Theodore Roosevelt of the 1890s and the United States' first experiment with imperialism. Some, including Max Boot of the *Wall Street Journal*, called on the United States to unambiguously “embrace its imperial role.” Like neo-isolationist and nationalist Republicans, they scorned international institutions and rejected the idea of collective security. But unlike them, neoconservatives strongly advocated using U.S. military and economic power to transform countries and regions in the United States' image.

During the 1990s, these neoconservatives operated like the imperialists of a century before, when Theodore Roosevelt, Sen. Henry Cabot Lodge, and others agitated against the anti-imperialist policies of Democratic U.S. President Grover Cleveland. When McKinley was elected in 1896, Roosevelt joined the administration as assistant secretary of the navy, but the imperialists primarily made their case through speeches, articles, and books. One hundred years later, a like-minded group of neocons, including Wolfowitz, Boot, Weekly Standard editor William Kristol, and former Assistant Secretary of Defense Richard Perle, developed a similar network of influence through access to the media. Although they gained only second-level jobs in the new Bush administration, they made the most of them—most notably, by providing an intellectual framework for understanding the Middle East following the attacks on September 11, 2001.

Al Qaeda and its terrorist network were latter-day products of the nationalist reaction to Western imperialism. These Islamic movements shared the same animus toward the West and Israel that older nationalist and Marxist movements did. They openly described the enemy as Western imperialism. Where they differed from the older movements was in their reactionary social outlook, particularly toward women, and in their ultimate aspiration

to restore the older Muslim empire to world dominance. But after September 11, as Washington tried to understand what had happened, the neoconservatives insisted that these movements were simply the products of a deranged Islam, inflamed by irrational resentment of—in the words of historian Bernard Lewis—“America's freedom and plenty.” The neoconservatives discounted the galvanizing effect that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and Western power in the region had on radical Islam. And once the Taliban had been ousted from Afghanistan, the neoconservatives set their sights on Baghdad. They argued that the overthrow of Hussein would not only deprive terrorists of a potential ally but could catalyze the transformation of the region into pro-American and pro-Israeli democracies. They denied it would stoke nationalism. Bush, Cheney, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, and National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice had earlier denounced nation building, but the neoconservatives, aided by Iraqi exiles, convinced these doubters that Iraq could be transformed on the cheap. In 1899, Manila's upper classes had assured McKinley that he need not worry about “nationalist sentiment.” Similarly, in 2003, the neoconservatives and the Iraqi exiles declared that U.S. troops would be welcomed with flowers.

After Baghdad fell in April 2003, and the few flowers had wilted, the Bush administration followed an older script. It put a U.S. administrator in charge of the country. U.S. officials promised eventually to hand sovereignty back to the Iraqis, but they made clear they would do so only after a government was installed that accorded with U.S. interests. It wouldn't be, Rumsfeld assured an interviewer, an “Iranian-type government,” regardless of what Iraqis wanted. Even after the handoff of sovereignty, administrator L. Paul Bremer declared the U.S. would retain control. It would be “a sovereign government that can't change laws or make decisions,” one Iraqi appointee complained. The Bush administration also declared support for privatizing the Iraqi economy—even though occupying forces are forbidden from selling state assets under the fourth Geneva Convention. (The White House awarded the great bulk of contracts for rebuilding Iraq and its oil industry to U.S. firms.) Ghassan Salamé, a political scientist and former senior advisor to the U.N. mission in occupied Baghdad, commented in November 2003 that “[t]he Coalition is intent on creating a new Iraq of its own; and one should not ignore the dimensions of that truly imperial ambition.”

For his part, Bush declared during an April 2004 press conference that, in invading and occupying Iraq, the United States had not acted as “an imperial power,” but as a “liberating power.” To be sure, the United States has not attempted to make Iraq part of a new, formal U.S. empire. But the invasion and occupation conformed perfectly to the variant of imperialism pioneered by the United States in Cuba and by the British in the Middle East. Instead of permanently annexing the countries they conquered, after a period of suzerainty, they would retain control by vetoing unfriendly governments and dominating the country's economy.

Predictably, these policies provoked a nationalist backlash. By the spring of 2004, the Bush administration was engaged in a fierce war of urban repression—raining bombs and artillery shells on heavily populated cities—to defend its hold over the country. The president tried to blame opposition to the occupation entirely on foreign terrorists or on high-level loyalists from the old regime, but it is clear that the Iraqi resistance includes people who opposed and even suffered under Hussein's regime.

A Bridge to the 19th Century

In trying to bring the Middle East into a democratic 21st century, Bush took it—and the United States—back to the dark days at the turn of the last century. Administration officials deeply misunderstood the region and its history. They viewed the Iraqis under Saddam the same way that Americans once viewed the Filipinos under the Spanish or the Mexicans under dictator Huerta—as victims of tyranny who, once freed, would embrace their American conquerors as liberators.

Bush resolved the contradiction between imperialism and liberation simply by denying that the United States was capable of acting as an imperial power. He assumed that by declaring his support for a “democratic Middle East,” he had inoculated Americans against the charge of imperialism. But, of course, the United States and

Britain had always claimed the highest motives in seeking to dominate other peoples. McKinley had promised to “civilize and Christianize the Filipinos.” What mattered was not expressed motives, but methods; and the Bush administration in Iraq, like the McKinley administration in the Philippines, invaded, occupied, and sought to dominate a people they were claiming to liberate.

Neoconservative intellectuals candidly acknowledge that the United States was on an imperial mission, but insist, in the words of neoconservative Stanley Kurtz, that imperialism is “a midwife of democratic self-rule.” Yet, in the Philippines in 1900, South Vietnam in 1961, or Iraq today, imperialism has not given birth to democracy, but war, and war conducted with a savagery that has belied the U.S. commitment to Christian civilization or democracy. Abu Ghraib was not the first time U.S. troops used torture on prisoners; it was rampant in the Philippines a century ago. Although nothing is inevitable, the imperial mindset sees the people it seeks to civilize or democratize as inferior and lends itself to inhumane practices. The British used poison gas in Iraq well before the idea ever occurred to Saddam Hussein.

As Iraq descends into violent chaos, some neoconservatives blame the Bush administration for not committing sufficient troops to pacify the population—unwittingly admitting that the neoconservative vision of an Iraq eager for U.S. intervention was mistaken. This kind of heavy hand worked poorly in the Philippines, where U.S. forces had much more firepower than their adversaries, and in Vietnam in the 1960s. But even assuming that an army of 250,000 could have subdued the uprisings in the so-called Sunni triangle and in the Shiite south, would it have altered the fundamental dynamic of imperialism and nationalism and of conqueror and conquered? Or would it have made the brute fact of U.S. domination even more visible to the average Iraqi, and therefore merely delayed, as it did in the Iran of the 1950s, the rejection of all things American?

Americans have always believed they have a special role to play in transforming the world, and their understanding of empire and imperialism has proven critical to this process. America's founders believed their new nation would lead primarily by example, but the imperialists of the 1890s believed the United States could create an empire that would eventually dwarf the rival European empires. The difference would be that America's empire would reflect its own special values. Indiana Sen. Albert Beveridge and the Protestant missionaries advocated “the imperialism of righteousness.” God, Beveridge contended, has made “the English-speaking and Teutonic peoples . . . master organizers of the world. . . . He has made us adept in government that we may administer government among the savage and senile peoples. Were it not for such a force as this the world would relapse into barbarism and night. And of all our race He has marked the American people as His chosen nation to finally lead in the regeneration of the world.”

By the early 20th century, this vision of American empire had faded, as the United States proved barely capable of retaining its hold over the Philippines. Wilson didn't merely change U.S. foreign policy; he changed its underlying millennial framework. Like Beveridge, he believed the United States was destined to create the Kingdom of God on Earth by actively transforming the world. But Wilson didn't believe it could be done through a U.S. imperium. America's special role would consist in creating a community of power that would dismantle the structure of imperialism and lay the basis for a pacific, prosperous international system. Wilson's vision earned the support not only of Americans but of peoples around the world.

As the 21st century dawned, the neoconservatives adopted Wilson's vision of global democracy, but they sought to achieve it through the unilateral means associated with Beveridge. They saw the United States as an imperial power that could transform the world single-handedly. But the neoconservatives and George W. Bush are likely to learn the same lesson in the early 21st century that Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson learned in the early 20th century. Acting on its own, the United States' ability to dominate and transform remains limited, as the ill-fated mission in Iraq and the reemergence of the Taliban in Afghanistan already suggest. When the United States goes out alone in search of monsters to destroy—venturing in terrain upon which imperial powers have already trod—it can itself become the monster.

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