THE FOUNDERS' NIGHTMARE

Recovering America's anti-imperialist roots

By Jackson Lears

For many of the Founders of the American republic, the worst fate imaginable for the state they were envisioning was for it to become an empire. Republics and empires were fundamentally incompatible, they believed. Opposition to empire, in fact, was the keystone of their thought—but one would never know that from the hoopla surrounding America's two-hundred-fiftieth birthday. The occasion provides an opportunity to celebrate the Founders' ingenuity in fashioning a system of checks and balances and their audacity in claiming a universal right to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" in 1776—as well as to condemn their hypocrisy, especially with regard to racial equality. But in all the tumult of commemoration, rarely, if at all, have we heard of the Founders' anti-imperialism.

Indeed, any number of scholars deny that the United States has ever been anything but an empire, citing the dark truth behind anodyne textbook phrases like "westward expansion." While this stance may have moral appeal, it ignores the critical distinction between settler colonialism and overseas empire. Thomas Jefferson, himself an agrarian populist, has been especially caught up in the crossfire. The "empire of liberty" that he imagined stretching from pole to pole in the Western Hemisphere was only ever a geopolitical fantasy rather than a foreign-policy agenda. And though Jefferson was a fervent expansionist who acquired a huge patch of North American territory in the Louisiana Purchase, "the winning of the West" did not require a massive imperial bureaucracy, overseas possessions and proxies, or a bloated executive branch that conducts much of its business in secret.

Like his fellow revolutionaries, Jefferson recoiled from such aspects of empire, past and present. Many of the Founders, studying the rise and fall of ancient civilizations (and observing the British), concluded that every virtuous republic of the past had eventually sunk into imperial corruption—undone by the vices of commerce and the temptations of military hubris. Tyrants, they noted, fought endless wars abroad to secure the resources to support their bloated imperial states, even as the majority of their populations lacked basic necessities. One need look no further than the mother country, declared Benjamin Franklin, to see the twin forces of warfare-state bureaucracy and public impoverishment. As he wrote to the American attorney Joseph Galloway from London in 1775:

> Here numberless and needless places, enormous salaries, pensions, perquisites, bribes, groundless quarrels, foolish expeditions, false accounts or no accounts, contracts and jobs, devour all revenue, and produce continual necessity in the midst of natural plenty.

Jefferson, reflecting on recent history in a letter to John Adams in 1816, took an equally dim view of British imperial extravagance. King George III and his circle of cronies, Jefferson wrote, had spent

> the fee simple of the kingdom, under pretence of governing it; their sinecures, pensions, priests, prelates, princes, and eternal wars, have mortgaged to its full value the last foot of their soil.

In his inaugural address of 1801, Jefferson described his worldview as one of "peace, commerce, and honest friendship with all nations, entangling alliances with none." This rejection of imperial

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overreach was rooted in an Enlightenment habit of mind, a sensible realism that bred restraint. George Washington epitomized it when he warned his successors against forming a "passionate attachment" to any foreign country—or, for that matter, a "habitual hatred" for any other. The United States, he concluded, should "cultivate peace and harmony with all."

The benign, commonsense appeal of Washington's words conceals how completely his views have disappeared from U.S. foreign-policy discourse in our own time, when diplomacy has become a lost, even disparaged art and journalists jabber childishly about "good guys" and "bad guys." The tenor of public debate has changed dramatically since John Quincy Adams—the last president to be raised in the Founders' classical republican tradition—warned Americans against going abroad "in search of monsters to destroy." Habitual hatred breeds monsters; passionate attachment creates a never-ending parade of victims who must be defended lest they become the monsters' prey. In this fraught scenario, peace and harmony can be dismissed as impossible goals. The reasonable cognitive style of the Enlightenment has given way to messianic moralism.

This gradual transformation of republican restraint into Manichaean zeal has had calamitous consequences for foreign-policy debate. The rise of the bipartisan, seemingly permanent consensus in support of American Empire has required a systematic forgetfulness among the American political class of the Founders' anti-imperial ideas and the disastrous history of U.S. imperialism itself. Forgetfulness of this kind is partly a result of plain ignorance, but it is also a crucial tactic in the manufacturing of consent for American Empire. Amnesia opens the door to fantasy: consider the endless invocations of D-Day as the golden moment when the United States saved the world. This myth not only ignores the central role of the Soviet Union in defeating the Third Reich but also fosters such ill-conceived ideas as the recent proposals for launching an amphibious invasion of Iran.

The amnesiac cast of mind reinforces the transformation of an imperfectly democratic republic into a bureaucratic imperial state—a form of government shrouded in secrecy, nearly all of whose important decisions are insulated from the influence of its citizens. Without an informed citizenry, no serious observer could claim that we are still living in a republic—or, for that matter, a "democracy," the favored word to describe popular sovereignty today. We have ignored the Founders' warnings, and their nightmares have come to pass.

The turn away from republican principles began toward the end of the nineteenth century, when the galloping, conscienceless pursuit of wealth provoked pitched battles between labor and capital. To nervous Americans with something to lose, class war seemed imminent, even as many among the elite sought to relieve the suffering of the working poor. The need to revamp the political culture became urgent. The question remained: How much of the republican tradition should be preserved—especially the part that cautioned against concentrating executive power in the service of overseas empire?

Theodore Roosevelt, the leading American imperialist and most powerful Progressive, had an answer. He had no use for the old republican distrust of centralized power. Business was getting bigger; so, too, should the federal government, not just to regulate the corporations, but to project

Illustrations by Gérard DuBois

national greatness through military adventures on the world stage. It would be hard to find a more complete abandonment of the Founders' hopes or fulfillment of their fears, but such was the ferocity of the electorate's mood that it carried TR's jingoism all the way to the White House.

By this time, political speech had become infused with evangelical fervor, a long way from the calm, measured tones of George Washington. Roosevelt himself, accepting the Progressive Party nomination for president in 1912, announced that the party stood "at Armageddon" and would "battle for the Lord." Only two decades earlier, the closing of the frontier had marked the end of the settler-colonial era. Roosevelt and his imperialist cohort assumed that the country had fulfilled its self-proclaimed manifest destiny, and its attention could now turn from the ethnic cleansing of Native Americans toward subduing indigenous populations abroad. What eventually became the "American Century" had begun.

From the beginning, the path to empire was obstructed by resistance. After the Spanish–American War, the Filipinos refused to embrace their self-proclaimed saviors and continued to fight for independence on their own terms, touching off a murderous counterinsurgency that lasted through the first decade of the twentieth century. The inability to distinguish friend from enemy in counterinsurgency warfare ensured that innocent Filipino civilians were routinely slaughtered by occupying U.S. troops—inflicting what is now blandly known as "collateral damage." No wonder such sensitive and articulate figures as William James and Mark Twain recoiled from the crimes being committed in the name of "civilization."

SINCE THE LATE FORTIES, THE FORCES DICTATING THE PATTERNS OF OUR GLOBAL ENGAGEMENT HAVE BEEN PRECISELY WHAT WASHINGTON WARNED AGAINST

Still, despite the brutality of the war and the eloquence of its critics, an imperial consensus coalesced. After 1908, when the anti-imperialist William Jennings Bryan was defeated in his final presidential campaign, both political parties embraced imperial ambitions—which continued to radiate racist undertones now expressed in the rhetoric of moral uplift: "I am going to teach the South American republics to elect good men," Woodrow Wilson told a British diplomat. This trope became crucial in justifying efforts to protect or locate investment opportunities abroad—especially in Latin America, where the U.S. Marine Corps general Smedley Butler acknowledged in 1933 that he had spent his military career as a "gangster for capitalism."

By the Second World War, the United States had acquired dozens of islands and atolls, possessions and protectorates. But the major leap forward for the American Empire occurred in 1947, when the National Security Act created the Central Intelligence Agency and laid the framework for the Department of Defense. Harry Truman's fervid anticommunism, combined with the Cold War atmosphere of perpetual emergency, had created what the German theorist (and Nazi) Carl Schmitt called a "state of exception," a condition that allowed for widespread departure from enduring public practices and principles. From then on, U.S. foreign affairs would be conducted by ever more lumbering, ever more secretive bureaucracies.

Two years after the CIA was founded, George Orwell published *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. The book was hailed as an urgent warning against the dangers of Soviet Communism—a justification, in effect, for the coming metastasis of the U.S. security state. This was the underlying irony of American Empire. It created a version of the very beast it was meant to vanquish: an omnipresent surveillance state dedicated to waging distant, endless war.

The rise of the national-security state called into being a military-industrial complex composed of defense contractors and consultants who knew that permanent war was good business. But the threats posed by the new warfare state were also embedded in the culture and psychology of the American political class, which during the Cold War became imbued with the amnesia that accompanies messianic moralism, the wholesale forgetting of George Washington's caution regarding emotion-driven foreign policy. Since the late Forties, the forces dictating the patterns of our global engagement have been precisely what he warned against: passionate attachment and habitual hatred.

The most intense attachment has been to the state of Israel. As Washington cautioned:

> Sympathy for the favorite nation, facilitating the illusion of an imaginary common interest in cases where no real common interest exists, and infusing into one the enmities of the other, betrays the former into a participation in quarrels and wars of the latter without adequate inducement or justification.

That is a succinct description of today's extraordinary state of affairs: the U.S. government has joined Israel in an unprovoked war on Iran, one that has no connection to any American interest and that threatens the entire world with economic calamity—and, perhaps, eventual nuclear annihilation. But while American complicity in Israeli aggression has never been so flagrant, the relationship has long been characterized by a tendency to

excuse Israel's wars of conquest as retaliation against their supposedly hostile Arab neighbors.

The myth of Israeli innocence has complemented the preposterous slogan that originated among nineteenth-century Christian Zionists: "a land without a people for a people without a land." It entered American politics during Harry Truman's lagging reelection campaign against Thomas Dewey in 1948, when Truman and the Democratic Party recognized they needed the full support of Jewish Americans to stage a come-from-behind victory. Truman's foreign-policy advisers, led by General George Marshall, opposed the intrusion of partisan politics into foreign policymaking. But the president's domestic advisers, notably Clark Clifford, insisted on the need to curry favor with Jewish voters by recognizing the state of Israel before its Zionist leadership had even declared its independence. At a meeting only two days before British administration of Palestine came to an end, Marshall rebuked Truman for even considering such a decision, which he feared would offend Arab allies. Truman, as Clifford recalled, claimed to share Marshall's point of view but "thought it best they all sleep on the matter." Two days later, the United States became the first country to recognize the state of Israel.

The Israel Defense Forces, meanwhile, were engaged in the new nation's inaugural war of conquest. The clearing of the Palestinians from the "land without a people" combined mass murder and psyops, in effect warning Palestinians that any resistance risked their village becoming another Deir Yassin, where the Israeli terrorist groups Irgun and Lehi killed more than one hundred inhabitants, including women and children. The Zionist leadership blamed the extreme right wing, but "published as widely as possible the news in order to frighten those living at the next locations in their journey of expulsion and destruction," as the Israeli historian Ilan Pappé has written. In the U.S. press, such atrocities often simply went unreported.

Chaim Weizmann, Israel's first president, called the country's expulsion of the Palestinians "a miraculous clearing of the land." But as historians have since discovered, there was nothing miraculous about it. The founders of Israel nurtured expansionist aims from the beginning. First, they pushed as far as possible beyond the boundaries set by the United Nations Partition Plan, which divided Mandatory Palestine into an Arab state and a Jewish one. (The state of Israel has never acknowledged any of its boundaries to be final.) In the decades that followed, Israeli leadership seized every opportunity to acquire more territory in the West Bank, Gaza, Syria, and Lebanon. The dream of a Greater Israel has always inspired Israeli foreign policy; Benjamin Netanyahu and his cabinet have only made it more overt and genocidal.

Though Dwight Eisenhower pushed back against Israeli expansion into the Sinai Peninsula during the Suez crisis of 1956, that episode was the exception that proved the rule. Tacit acceptance of Israeli aggression quickly became routine among American policymakers. In their 1992 book *The Passionate Attachment*, George W. and Douglas B. Ball argue that Lyndon Johnson, by covering up the Israeli attack on the USS *Liberty* during the Six-Day War in 1967, gave the Israelis the impression "that nothing they might do would offend the Americans to the point of reprisal," even as the attack resulted in hundreds of American casualties. "If America's leaders did not have the courage to punish Israel for the blatant murder of American citizens," the Balls wrote, "it seemed clear that their American friends would let them get away with almost anything." Generous aid packages would continue to flow, and in return, Israel could pose as "the Middle East's only democracy" and a faithful anti-Soviet ally in the battle against Communism.

The persistence of the American passionate attachment can be partly explained by the outsized influence of the Israel lobby. Its roots date to 1950, when several Zionist groups began pressuring Congress to support financial aid to Israel, which the State Department opposed for fear of alienating Arab allies. In 1959, one of the lobby's most influential organizations, the American Zionist Committee for Public Affairs, began calling itself the American Israel Public Affairs Committee. Since that time, AIPAC has intervened ever more flagrantly in U.S. politics, pouring millions into campaigns to defeat candidates who criticize Israel. One could hardly find a more apt justification of George Washington's warning that uncritical devotion to a favorite nation encourages that nation's advocates "to tamper with domestic factions, to practice the arts of seduction, to mislead public opinion, to influence or awe the public councils."

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The most egregious contemporary example of the Israel lobby's influence is, of course, its campaign to persuade Americans to tolerate the genocide of Palestinians. Since the American public has recently turned on Israel, rejecting the horrors it is inflicting in Gaza and the insanity of attacking Iran, we can hope that the lobby's grip on American voters is loosening. But what Washington called "public councils"—the country's elected representatives and official spokespersons—continue to comply with the lobby's agenda. The most disturbing evidence of Israel's ongoing

influence is a section buried in the thousand-plus pages of the House-drafted National Defense Authorization Act for the fiscal year of 2027. This section incorporates into U.S. law a proposal for a "United States–Israel Defense Technology Cooperation Initiative" that would integrate the IDF into the Pentagon's most sensitive research, development, testing, evaluation, and data-sharing efforts. It would also obscure billions of dollars in military aid to Israel by burying these appropriations in the U.S. defense budget, virtually removing them from public scrutiny.

As in the corporate world, mergers imply acquisitions. In this case, Israel acquires immunity from



congressional oversight as it drags the United States into its wars of conquest, while its weapons contractors acquire further access to American taxpayers' dollars. As I write, a handful of congressional dissenters are trying to remove the relevant section from the bill, but their efforts have thus far been unsuccessful. If this version of the NDAA were to pass, it would be an unprecedented surrender of American independence to a foreign power. On the two-hundred-fiftieth anniversary of our Declaration of Independence, this is a tragic irony, if ever there were one.

In the heart of the foreign-policy establishment, love of Israel has been matched by an equally ardent hatred of the Soviet Union and, later, Russia. (Contemporary Russophobes have difficulty distinguishing the two states.) After the Second World War, fear and contempt for the Soviets animated an atmosphere of constant struggle, sometimes with apocalyptic significance. Only a population convinced that we faced madmen bent on world domination would have submitted to the series of military misadventures abroad that culminated in the catastrophe in Vietnam.

As Daniel Ellsberg, Seymour Hersh, and other truth-tellers exposed the futility, brutality, and mendacity of the Vietnam War, the political class turned briefly critical of imperial projects, culminating in the Church Committee hearings in 1975, convened to investigate the illegal activities of the CIA, the FBI, and other U.S. intelligence agencies. Anti-imperialist forces finally seemed to be exercising significant power in Washington, but the moment was short-lived. Fear of what was called Vietnam Syndrome—a reluctance to use military force abroad—promoted a default setting of military intervention as the first, not the last, policy move to take into consideration.

The lessons of the Vietnam War were being rewritten, and Jimmy Carter's foreign policy swerved back toward an anti-Soviet focus. Carter's national security adviser, Zbigniew Brzezinski, urged an increasing return to covert operations as an instrument of foreign policy. The military shifted in that direction at about the same time, with the creation of the Joint Special Operations Command, which would move beyond the established practices of the Navy SEALs and the Army's Green Berets, creating a tight band of torturers and assassins who could be made instantly invisible. Brzezinski's dubious achievement was the secret CIA sponsorship of Afghan rebels who ultimately provoked the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, leading to the effective end of détente.

During the Carter years, Henry "Scoop" Jackson and other Cold Warriors rallied bipartisan support for renewed confrontation with the Soviet Union, relying on the frequent invocation of human rights despite (or maybe because of) the concept's vagueness and susceptibility to imperial purposes. The subsequent fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union seemed to promise an end to American Russophobia, but that relief was only temporary. By the late Nineties, American mass media were again awash in stories of murderous Russian thugs and scheming Russian oligarchs. Essentialist and implicitly racist pseudoexplanations of the Russian national character proliferated: Russians were inherently brutal, inherently treacherous, diabolically cunning but incorrigibly stupid.

Fantasies of a persistent Russian threat and illusions of unipolarity also justified the eastward expansion of NATO, at least to the American political class. The collapse of the Soviet Union had deprived the alliance of its raison d'être, and European leaders were recalling Charles de Gaulle's example from the Sixties, building the foundations of a united, independent Europe with preparations

for a European Union and a common currency. But the Clinton Administration wanted to keep NATO alive as an instrument for projecting U.S. power into Eastern Europe and preventing the Europeans from creating even the hint of a rival to what was supposedly the world's only superpower.

George Kennan was one of several seasoned diplomats who spoke out against this provocation. "I think it is the beginning of a new Cold War," he said in 1998. "There was no reason for this whatsoever. No one was threatening anybody else. This expansion would make the Founding Fathers of this country turn over in their graves." Kennan had been in and around the foreign service for more than half a century and probably knew more about Russia—its culture, its politics, its vision of itself in the world—than any other living American. He also understood clearly what the Founders thought (and felt) about foreign policy. Even so, his perspective received very little attention from policymakers.

Despite warnings from elder statesmen like Kennan, conflict between the Serbs and the Albanians that began in 1998 gave the Clinton team its opportunity to transform NATO from a defensive alliance into an offensive one. The United States insisted on NATO air strikes against the Serbs, causing hundreds, if not thousands, of unnecessary civilian deaths while inventing a new moral rationale for military intervention: the protection of an innocent population from imminent genocide. The notion of preemptive humanitarian bombing, oxymoronic as it was, proved irresistible to liberal moralists and became a potent tool for splintering the antiwar left, which has never recovered. If Russians needed any evidence of a new, aggressive NATO, the bombing of the Serbs supplied it.

The Clinton Administration's discovery of humanitarian excuses for imperial adventures marked a fitting conclusion to the Nineties. The decade that had started out with hopes for a peace dividend after the Cold War ended with the strengthening of bipartisan militarism, undergirded by familiar economic and emotional foundations. Lobbyists for the military-industrial complex kept defense spending hovering near half the total amount of discretionary spending. Despite Beltway insiders' fantasies that we had reached the end of history, various "monsters to destroy" kept surfacing, usually appearing in character as "another Hitler" (Saddam Hussein, Slobodan Milošević) and always serving as justifications to intervene militarily.

It was Vladimir Putin, however, who would emerge as the most durable monster. His demonization has been at the center of the revived Russophobia of the twenty-first century. This resurgence has done far more harm than simply offering a rationale for endless NATO expansion; it has damaged the American practice of diplomacy, perhaps fatally. During the Cold War, U.S. leaders feared Communism as an oppressive economic system and the Soviet Union as a rival imperial power, but they continued to maintain diplomatic relations, even during the Cuban Missile Crisis. After the Cold War ended, the Clinton Administration sought to impose a draconian system of "shock therapy" under the direction of the rarely sober Boris Yeltsin, but since he was replaced by Putin on New Year's Eve in 1999, American presidents (with the exception of the incompetent and dangerous Donald Trump) have been increasingly reluctant to talk to the Russian leader. The bulk of the Democratic Party, along with many Republicans, recoil from him as a crazed revanchist intent on resurrecting the Russian Empire. Rather than an impersonal economic system, we face a highly personalized nation: "Putin's Russia." Distinguished diplomats from both political parties, such as Chas Freeman and Jack Matlock, now lament the decay of their craft—which requires seeking to understand a geopolitical conflict from the adversary's perspective, not in order to accept that view but to locate a solution that will serve both sides. Diplomacy has been reduced to demands made behind the barrel of a gun.

THE DECADE THAT HAD STARTED OUT WITH HOPES FOR PEACE AFTER THE COLD WAR ENDED WITH THE STRENGTHENING OF BIPARTISAN MILITARISM

This refusal to engage in diplomacy with the Russians—on the assumption that they were inherently untrustworthy—helped to start the war in Ukraine, and to sustain it down to the present. As war clouds gathered, Putin faced multiplying threats: the Biden Administration rejected Putin's proposals for a new European security architecture, as the Americans had done repeatedly before; the United States began supplying Ukraine with hundreds of millions of dollars in military aid and technical support; and the shelling of separatist forces in the Donbas intensified. Facing such bleak prospects, Putin finally decided to recognize and protect the breakaway republics.

Even then, Putin and Volodymyr Zelensky were eager to bring an end to the conflict. But when they were on the verge of negotiating a peace agreement (which included a Ukrainian commitment to neutrality and nonmembership in NATO) in Istanbul in March 2022, the United States implicitly rejected any diplomatic alternatives by escalating its economic sanctions against Russia and increasing military aid to Ukraine. Secure in their

delusions of U.S. supremacy and Russian weakness, and confident that stepped-up economic warfare would bring down Putin, American policymakers pressed on, trying to weaken Russia and hoping it would collapse. Here as elsewhere, the choice of confrontation over diplomacy has led to another exercise in futility.

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, immediately intensified the passionate attachment to Israel and clouded political debate. The Bush Administration's fantasy of democratizing the Middle East by force meshed perfectly with Israel's expansionist dreams; it was no accident that Israelis became ardent cheerleaders for Bush's invasion of Iraq and later persuaded Trump to attack Iran.

The influence of 9/11 on Russophobia, however, was subtler and slower, as the war on terror created another "state of exception" even more enveloping than the Cold War had been. In the counterterrorist imagination, the battlefield is everywhere; the world is thronging with terrorists. Among policymakers, this paranoia revived the Cold War feeling that we were engaged in an apocalyptic struggle between democracy and authoritarianism. By 2007, once Putin made clear that he would chart his own foreign-policy course, he could easily be classed among the authoritarians, alongside the jihadis his own country was fighting in the Caucasus. Less than ten years later, the demonization of Putin would reach its reductio ad absurdum, in the delusion that his minions had effected the defeat of Hillary Clinton via collusion with Trump.

But beyond this psychological impact, the alleged omnipresence of danger since 9/11 has been used to justify a systematic assault on civil liberties; an unprecedented use of warrantless surveillance on U.S. citizens; a near-deification of presidential power in the novel legal doctrine of a "unitary executive"; a legitimation of torture; and a weaponization of finance through the widespread application of economic sanctions that often stiffen a targeted country's resistance to American policies—as is apparent in both Iran and Russia.

The post-9/11 parade of forever wars has come at considerable cost to taxpayers, including those yet unborn. During the Biden Administration, the Costs of War Project at Brown University estimated that the United States had spent $8 trillion on its global war on terror. This amounted to $70,000 per taxpayer. Future interest on these "credit card wars," as the Harvard Kennedy School's Linda Bilmes calls them, will have cost $2 trillion by 2030, more than the wars themselves. Human losses were equally dire: 7,000 service members and 8,000 contractors killed, amounting, in all, to 940,000 total deaths from direct violence, with 3.6 to 3.8 million more people dying indirectly in war zones. Veterans and active-duty personnel in these conflicts died by suicide at four times the rate of American combat losses—more than 30,000 from 2001 to 2021—mainly driven by repeated deployments and post-traumatic stress disorder. Caring for these veterans will cost up to $2.5 trillion by 2050. More difficult to calculate are the opportunity costs, as trillions of dollars flowed to debt service and military contractors, instead of, for example, to the repair of crumbling infrastructure and a broken health-care system. The Founders feared that an empire committed to endless war would create scarcity amid plenty; centuries later, that fear has been vindicated.

The Costs of War report was published before Trump took office for the second time. He has since exacerbated what was already an unsustainable situation. As of September, the Congressional Budget Office has estimated that the Iran war has already cost $38 billion. Trump's 2027 budget request proposes raising the military budget by 66 percent, from $900 billion to $1.5 trillion. This would be almost 80 percent of all discretionary spending. We can be sure that debt-service and opportunity costs will continue to soar.

The numbers can be numbing, but they suggest an inescapable conclusion: The empire is flailing. The republic has perished. All that is necessary to commemorate its death is to extend a suggestion Mark Twain made, in 1901, to change the flag flying over the occupied Philippines from the Stars and Stripes to a skull and crossbones. We could fly the new flag everywhere, even over the Capitol Building. After all, as Trump told a glittering, giggling crowd in Palm Beach, "we're like pirates!" and seizing Iranian tankers near the Strait of Hormuz is "a very profitable business!" Perhaps we have finally moved beyond Orwell to a state of absolute shamelessness. We no longer need the euphemistic absurdities of newspeak; we can dispense with concealing empire in the garments of "global leadership." We can call it what it is: piracy.

Still, it remains important to underscore one point: although Trump's flagrant vulgarity and rapacity make him an easy target, if the Democratic Party were to retake power, we have good reason to fear it would resume the imperial project, once again wrapped in righteousness and animated by the globalist dream of remaking the world as America writ large. If not by direct interventions, then the job could be done by proxy wars, such as the one being waged against Russia.

To grasp the depth of this folly, we need only recall the pathetic posturing of the decrepit Joe Biden, barely able to complete a sentence, teetering at the podium, repeating the mantra "I will not bow down" in response to Putin's allegedly voracious ambitions. Our geopolitical ethics have not advanced beyond Theodore Roosevelt's. The

impersonation of a schoolyard bully, tarted up with claims of protecting innocents from bad guys, remains an influential model of American leadership.

How might the Founders of the republic have responded to such imperial hubris? It is difficult to imagine the extent of their fury, given the seriousness of their commitment to the republican project. Still, they might well have remained resilient. In a letter to James Madison in 1787, affirming his belief in the need for a bill of rights as part of the draft Constitution under discussion, Thomas Jefferson reflected on the tedious labor involved in constructing a republican government from the ground up. Despite the frustrations and false starts involved in realizing their vision, he wrote, "we are never permitted to despair of the commonwealth."

Jefferson's admonition remains compelling. Anger is appropriate. But despair ends in mere acquiescence. To be sure, temptations to despair proliferate as I write: the world is fragmenting into bitterly rivalrous and hostile nations; new fantasies of winnable nuclear wars are appearing regularly. But it is precisely this fragmentation, married to militarist inanity, that underscores the desperate need for cooperation among nation-states to further interests they all have in common, such as mitigating climate change or reasserting international control over nuclear weapons.

Spurred by this urgency, and assuming that the American Empire must ultimately accept the realities of a multipolar world, the retired British Royal Navy commodore Steve Jermy has called for a revival of the "spirit of Westphalia." This phrase refers to the foundational principles of the Peace of Westphalia (1648), which ended the Thirty Years' War in Europe, establishing state sovereignty, noninterference, and legal equality among nations. The spirit of Westphalia was the basis for international law, now a thing of shreds and tatters. Jermy proposes we stitch it back together, under the auspices (at least initially) of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. The OSCE is a group of fifty-seven European, North American, and Asian nations, including Russia, the United States, and all the other NATO countries, that aims to underwrite international comity and prevent the outbreak of war. Jermy is under no illusions about what an enormous task averting another world war will be, about how much power and wealth (not to mention ignorance and stupidity) is being deployed to expand the wars in Iran and Ukraine into wider conflicts. But, he believes, we have no choice if we want to stop the headlong rush to global disaster.

However modest, Jermy's proposal to revive international law offers at least the beginning of a solution. The OSCE aims to practice what NATO preaches: cooperative action on behalf of collective security. But the OSCE makes security indivisible—that is, no nation's security would come at the expense of any other's, as happens in a defensive alliance against an actual or imaginary foe. The assumptions underlying indivisible security are those of Westphalia: every sovereign nation regards every other as an equal; each disavows the use of force against any other, as well as any interference in any nation's domestic affairs; each guarantees the right to develop one's own political, social, economic, and cultural traditions. While the United States and Russia (or the Soviet Union) have both signed on to these principles at various points since the Seventies, the former's avowed commitment to protecting democracy and freedom has consistently undermined any commitment to nonintervention. But in a system of indivisible security, violations of sovereignty would provoke collective action against the aggressor. In such a world, the United States could not engage in "democracy promotion."

All evidence indicates that there would be widespread support across the Global South for such a recuperation of international law, but it would require a massive change of mind among the West's political class. Fortunately, an anti-imperialist ferment is already flourishing in less official arenas of U.S. public life. It can be found in think tanks like the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, in the critique of empire articulated in publications ranging from *The American Conservative* to *Jacobin*, and on dozens of independent media platforms and podcasts featuring conversations among anti-imperialist thinkers with a wide variety of expertise, including former diplomats and military or intelligence officers (Alastair Crooke, Matthew Hoh); university professors (John Mearsheimer, David Gibbs); and even a former Moscow correspondent turned emergency-room doctor (Matt Bivens). And there are many more broadcasting to the Anglophone world from Italy, Lebanon, Japan, and Brazil, among many other places. Together they have attracted millions of followers who want governments that address social needs rather than confront imaginary enemies. This emerging subculture could help create the foundation for whatever multipolar world order emerges in the wake of U.S. hegemony.

A graceful strategic retreat from unwise and overextended commitments abroad is the only reasonable path forward—one that leads toward hope rather than despair. The killers of hope are well financed, heavily armed, and deeply entrenched; overcoming them will require ingenuity and determination as well as a measure of luck. But the stakes are too high to give in to despair. ■