Diagnosing the “disoriented giant” syndrome

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[Introduction:] Finishing a book is a lot like one of those social situations in which the brilliant response springs to mind long after the moment for it has passed. Last summer I surrendered the manuscript for The American Ascendancy (to appear on bookshelves this April). The book tackles a simple but big question: how did the United States secure its dominance in world affairs and how did it use its power? The book does take up briefly in the conclusion how the answer to that question bears on current problems. But watching the deepening plight of the George W. Bush administration over the last few months and reading other historians also grappling with a troubled present have inspired some second, more pointed thoughts.

[Disoriented giant:] There is more to the current mess than the president’s personal foibles or the administration’s blinkered, distorted view of how the world works. Most obviously for students of U.S. policy, the Bush administration missteps fit into a recent pattern. For four decades the United States has behaved internationally like a disoriented giant on the world stage. The collapse of the Johnson presidency under the weight of the Vietnam War set the pattern, subsequently confirmed by the events leading to Nixon’s disgrace, a mounting attack on his détente policy, Carter’s embrace of human rights, his dramatic mid-term reversal, a second

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dramatic reversal under Reagan, and a dizzying search for a post-Cold War conceptual
foundation under Bush senior and Clinton. The current disarray seems part of a pattern so
persistent that we need to wonder whether it may have deep structural roots and whether the next
presidential administration, Republican or Democratic, will be able to escape its grip.

One approach to diagnosing this disabling syndrome is to consider how developments
before the 1960s might have helped generate the problems of the last four decades. The grand
international role that Americans embraced in the course of World War II and the early Cold
War carried heavy and unforeseen consequences. Not least was an array of international
commitments each with the potential to divert resources and attention overseas, to go bad, and to
sow deep divisions at home over how to rectify a failed policy. And it ignited keen competition
among diverse domestic constituencies, interest groups, and lobbies eager to give one regional
commitment or policy principle priority over others. These are the defining features of the
disoriented giant syndrome. Put differently, the consensus that U.S. policymakers shaped in the
1940s to win support for a dramatically expanded international role did not subsequently prove
equal to the pressures that global commitments generated. Consensus began unraveling in the
late 1950s and was in tatters by the late 1960s. The corrosives then included notably nuclear fear,
fiscal constraints, and youth discontent. This creeping confusion within the foreign policy public
as well as the mass public was no major matter for a state with relatively modest international
aspirations (such as the United States had been up to mid-century). But for one determined to cut
a large, even dominant figure on the international stage, the collapse has proven recurrently
disabling and demoralizing. It has left policy erratic and public support uncertain.

This line of historical analysis on the sources of our current and persistent dysfunction
seems right as far as it goes, but a global and comparative perspective can help us push it farther.
Such a perspective suggests two major points: that global dominance is not just inherently
difficult to manage but that it poses special difficulties for Americans.

A commitment to empire is arguably one piece of the disoriented giant puzzle that globalists
and comparativists can help us with. A claim championed by New Left historians in the 1960s
just as the disorientation began to set in has of late gained credibility among influentials on the
right and left of the U.S. political spectrum. While it may be fashionable to talk of an American
empire, does the claim make historical sense?

A basic working definition of empire intended neither as a pejorative or an encomium
and derived comparatively would look as follows: a centrally directed political enterprise in
which coercion (violence or at least the threat of violence) is used to subjugate a territorially
delimited area. Once created, empire acquires other structural features. Maintaining control
depends on collaboration between metropolitan and colonial elites (with each exercising
disproportionate influence within their own societies) supplemented by a variety of other
mechanisms from proximate military bases to a class of imperial administrators to ideological
orthodoxies that rationalize dominance at home as well as abroad. Skeptics may want to argue
that informal control, so prominent a feature of the U.S. case, does not qualify as empire. This
objection does not withstand scrutiny. Rome’s eastern frontier and China’s subordination of
lands beyond the line of direct imperial authority leap to mind and suggest that informally
controlled territory has been a significant feature of empire. Rather than focus on distinctions
between formal and informal control, we might more fruitfully think instead about how control is
exercised – within the limits imposed by imperial resources, by the technologies of the time, and
by the tolerance of subject peoples. Even formal control has recurrently depended on enlisting
subordinated people in the imperial enterprise by making concessions that make dominance more manageable and cost effective. A better test than formal or informal control is who ultimately decides whether local rulers stay or go, which alliance or base is authorized, and from what direction the indigenous military takes it cues. 

This rough definition would suggest that the United States has been an empire for a long time and in several guises. It began as a continental empire (a form of settler colonialism already well advanced at the time of national independence); it turned to formal overseas empire at the end of the nineteenth century in Hawaii, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines; and it soon thereafter began practicing informal empire A list of countries incorporated within that informal empire for substantial periods of time across the twentieth century and into the twenty first would include large hunks of Central America and the Caribbean (Nicaragua, Panama, Dominican Republic, Haiti, and Cuba); a broad swath of maritime East Asia (South Korea, Japan, South Vietnam, Taiwan), and a loose assemblage of western Asian clients (Iran, Iraq, and Afghanistan). To this list should arguably be added western Europe in the early Cold War. In all these cases Washington has had an imperial justification for extending frontiers (whether Manifest Destiny, the Monroe doctrine, the containment doctrine, or the war on terrorism), has sought accommodation with amenable local elites, raised to prominence U.S.-sponsored armies, created a formidable network of military bases and alliances, distributed aid to create and sustain clients,

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dispatched proconsuls to provide direction to client regimes and occupation authorities, and in extremis launched U.S. military forces and covert operations to change governments. This long and varied record suggests empire is imprinted in the national genetic code.

The peculiar aspect of this empire is that time and again significant parts of the citizenry have responded with aversion and even outright opposition rather than enthusiasm, pride, or simple acceptance. Each imperial thrust has evoked a hostile response inspired by three sources. The oldest is the conviction on the part of classically-trained American leaders that empire was a fundamental threat to republican survival. Their conviction gave rise to sharp disputes in the 1840s over the continental empire created by the Jefferson/Jackson/Polk line of policymakers. The critics rallied again after 1898 when they saw William McKinley conducting an aggressive war and concentrating a dangerous degree of executive power. Fear for fragile republican institutions persisted through the twentieth century and is still evident in such current authors as Patrick Buchanan and Chalmers Johnson. A second source of anti-imperial sentiment is the consumer republic that arose during the twentieth century. Consumer-citizens don’t rank imperial glory among their top priorities, and they are loath to make personal sacrifices for distant, dirty wars in Korea, Vietnam, and Central American as well as now in Iraq. They have registered their disapproval at the ballot box in fairly predictable fashion. Finally, American doubts about empire have flowed from a fundamental national principle given sharpest articulation in wartime propaganda. Beginning with World War I and continuing with World War II and the Cold War, Washington has sought to draw a clear line between its commitment to national liberation and its foes’ record of imperial subjugation. George W. Bush echoed Woodrow Wilson, Franklin Roosevelt, Harry Truman, and Ronald Reagan when in 2001 he
reminded his fellow citizens that they were “a power that went into the world to protect but not possess, to defend but not to conquer.”

The widespread, persistent conviction that empire was un-American has helped generate domestic dissent, hobbled imperial projects, and thrown policymakers on the defensive. This combination of lingering republican anxieties, an inward-turning consumerist ethic, and a tradition of rhetorical support for self determination makes Americans not just odd imperialists but arguably in various measures self-deceived, ineffectual, and frustrated ones.

Compounding the muddle, U.S. backing for self-determination and decolonization has created expectations abroad subversive of the very control American leaders have sought to exercise. Seen from overseas, Americans have placed themselves in the contradictory position of celebrating self determination as a fundamental principle while blatantly violating the principle in multiple ways in many places and not just in the present but over several centuries. How could the United States be what it had repeatedly professed to oppose? The problem of justifying and managing this “empire of liberty” before a watching world was nicely captured by Patrick Buchanan in 2002 amid the debate over “regime change” in Iraq. He asked rhetorically what’s wrong with empire. “Only this. It is a century too late. Jefferson’s idea, that ‘all just powers come from the consent of the governed,’ and Wilson’s idea of the self-determination of peoples have taken root in the souls of men.”

An anti-imperial people running an empire in a post-imperial era creates all sorts of debilitating problems. Recognizing that the United States possesses its own old, rich, and still vital imperial tradition seems the obvious precondition to addressing the sturdy contradictions that keeps the giant lurching from crisis to crisis.

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[Making good on claims to hegemony:] If a tortured relationship to empire is half the giant’s problem, the forbidding notion of hegemony may be the key to the other half. If in the U.S. case empire is genetic, hegemony is an acquired characteristic. Americans achieved global dominance over the first two thirds of the twentieth century. What began to take form in the years before and after World War I emerged in the wake of World War II as a U.S.-inspired, designed, and regulated international system. It involved both the subtle penetration of American practices and products and the self-conscious promotion of global norms that have to be seen as distinct from our historically grounded understanding of empire.

U.S. hegemony was doubly exceptional. It arose out of a rate of economic growth over the course of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that had no precedent in human history. The resulting wealth inspired awe around the world. But U.S. hegemony is exceptional in a second, more consequential sense. Its reach far surpassed that of all other previous great powers. Others that might be called hegemon such as Britain operated within decided limits imposed by a substantial field of near equal competitors, by rudimentary communications and transport technologies, and by comparatively minor league economies. The U.S. reach was genuinely global. Virtually no one escaped its multi-layered influence in which economic and cultural clout reinforced military and political standing.

Like empire, hegemony poses problems that add to the giant’s international gyrations. But they are problems of a different sort. Hegemony gained was easily taken for granted. Since the 1970s Washington has neglected the duties of the hegemon and at times shown open hostility to the very international institutions and norms that earlier policymakers, corporate leaders, and private groups helped put in place. This negligent if not defiant stance has depleted U.S.
legitimacy in the eyes of elites around the world, and much of what remained of that legitimacy at the start of the new century has since been squandered. This is no small matter. Legitimacy is arguably the essential attribute of a hegemon. Holding that position involves more than reaping the rewards of material opportunities and psychic gratification; integral to any claims to international leadership on such a broad scale are heavy obligations. A largely passive power in time forfeits its legitimacy and hence its capacity to lead by appeal and example. Cooperation and acceptance resting on coercion is not hegemony but empire. Whether Americans can rescue legitimacy may depend on their response to looming global problems – from growing income inequalities, to environmental degradation, to nuclear proliferation, to the persistence of grinding poverty, hunger, and disease. Thus far Washington’s anemic, distinctly corporate understanding of hegemony as a commitment to global free markets has ruled out an effective response. The market model is itself one major source of global problems, and rigid adherence to it obstructs the kind of state intervention critical to an effective response.

U.S. hegemony, while distinct from empire, has become entangled with it in ways that compound the crisis of legitimacy. Legitimacy strongly felt by Americans and widely accepted abroad made it easier to assert U.S. control over the fate of particular countries. Such exercises of empire could be excused at home in terms of hegemonic (or civilizational) duty, while foreigners sympathetic to aspects of the U.S. model found it easier to blink away at least some of the more blatant exercises of imperial intervention. But empire pursued too enthusiastically can eat away at legitimacy abroad. International polls reveal a revulsion against U.S. policy dragging down favorable attitudes toward U.S. society and culture. Elites in Latin America, long the target of U.S. control, have expressed the deepest skepticism issuing from any region. But nowhere is this dysfunctional tangle between empire and hegemony more striking than in the Middle East.
After World War II U.S. policymakers carved out an informal empire in the name of access to oil, containment of communism, and defense of Israel. Faced with sharp regional resistance in recent decades, American leaders have tried to justify the imperial presence in terms of hegemonic goals – in various combinations democracy, stability, free markets, counter terrorism, and human rights. In the process they have deepened the doubts of peoples in the region while confusing themselves and perplexing the public on which they depend ultimately for support. Empire with its increasingly desperate flexing of military muscle has steadily drained the broader hegemonic project of the legitimacy essential to its credibility and hence its survival.

As with empire, thinking about a history of hegemony poses fundamental questions of public policy. Americans are failing as hegemons now. If they want to abandon that role, they have hard questions to consider. What may be the costs to themselves and to others of that course? How do they then relate to the rest of the world – on an ad hoc basis, from a hemispheric base, in concert with Britain and other states formed from British settlement, in defense of consumer society and thus of access to foreign oil, as the single-minded champion of democracy, or as the wary lookout against any rising regional powers that might challenge the run of the U.S. military writ? Abandoning hegemony without making considered choices about the alternatives would be to risk perpetuating the old disorientation albeit in new form.

[Conclusion:] Introducing empire and hegemony into the lexicon of the foreign policy establishment and even work-a-day political discourse may seem like a tall order. A broad, detached, historically informed sense of where our path has taken us may not make for good media sound bites or compete well against bland, reassuring platitudes about pursuing the national interest or match up against stirring calls for muscular, righteous leadership. An
inattention to the past and an ethnocentric view of the world are hardy features of U.S. foreign relations, and there is no good grounds for expecting change under the auspices of a political class that has taken the globe as its special preserve or a corporate-dominated media that entertains and pacifies the public with pleasing, plausible reports on the world refracted through a nationalist lens. The long view thus engenders a deep pessimism about breaking out of our current malaise in which empire is practiced but not widely accepted, in which hegemony is claimed as a prerogative without corresponding obligations, and in which as a consequence disorientation becomes a congenital feature of policy and public discourse. If this reading of the situation today is right, we must reconcile ourselves to more of the same – more policy gyrations against the backdrop of an electorate divided against itself and mistrustful of its leaders and a world disillusioned with U.S. promises and fearful of U.S. power. The disoriented giant will stumble on, not quite sure where he is headed or why. The effects on domestic political arrangements and popular welfare – distinctly deleterious to date – will only grow worse. Perhaps the time is ripe to look beyond the immediate spectacle of Iraq in collapse, an administration in a tailspin, and a policy establishment obsessed with matters military. Perhaps, just perhaps some serious historical perspective grounded in global and comparative insights would help us come to grips with problems that are fundamentally historical, profoundly structural, and painfully relevant to what this nation is about.