

**Charles S. Maier, *Among Empires: American Ascendancy and Its Predecessors* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006)**

Roundtable Editor: Thomas Maddux

Reviewers: Andrew J. Bacevich, Michael H. Hunt, Anna K. Nelson

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**Commentary by Andrew J. Bacevich, Boston University**

*Among Empires* consists of two quite different essays stapled together to form a book.

The first essay, entitled “Recurring Structures,” is a rich, wide-ranging, and imaginative reflection on empire. In this essay, the United States hovers in the background – the real interest lies in teasing out large truths about the formation, governance, behavior, and quandaries of empires throughout history. Yet those fixated with the American imperial project – I place myself in that category – will find this essay chockfull of insights relevant to the predicament in which the United States finds itself today. The marginalization (and accompanying corruption) of legislatures at the expense of the executive; democratic politics transformed into empty rituals of plebiscitary approval; elites somberly evoking the need to shoulder imperial “burdens” that they privately adjudge both thrilling and lucrative; the delicate challenge of properly delineating and then managing the imperial frontier; the complexities inherent in exploiting while also husbanding military power: we in our own day are by no means the first to confront these phenomena.

For this reader at least, the second essay, “America’s Turn” comes across as less satisfying. Whereas “Recurring Structures” is filled with sharply rendered judgments, in “America’s Turn,” the author, now focusing more narrowly on the United States, becomes diffident and even elusive.

Let me state plainly the purpose of the remarks that follow: I want to draw Professor Maier out on issues where I found him dodgy. Here is Professor Maier stating his overall purpose in page 12: “The issue is to discern what long-term implications for international and domestic society and politics arise if we have in fact become an empire. Do we safeguard or subvert our domestic institutions? Do we make world politics more peaceful or more violent? Do we make it more or less likely that the peoples of poorer nations will share in, or be excluded from, economic development and welfare?” These are excellent questions that deserve straightforward answers.

Professor Maier complicates his task somewhat by declaring at the outset that he has “decided to avoid claiming that the United States is or is not an empire.” (p. 3) Such claims, he writes, tend to be “polarizing.” (p. 3) Still, it becomes immediately evident that even if Maier wants to avoid the e-word, he implicates the United States in a pattern of imperial or hegemonic behavior that puts it in the same category with real-live-no-kidding empires of the past. (We

might summarize the argument thusly: Sure it looks, walks, and quacks like a duck, but since some people find the word duck offensive, we'll substitute terms like "duckish" or "duck-like" instead. I myself am not certain what this accomplishes.)

In "America's Turn," Professor Maier actually identifies two American empires: the first, an "Empire of Production" and its successor the "Empire of Consumption." (I rather like the dual construct, but let me confess my own biases: I find much in the first empire to admire – it had plenty of faults but it also had substance; I view the second empire for the most part as fraudulent and loathsome).

As an empire of production, the United States came into its own with the onset of World War II. The foundation of this empire consisted of "Fordism" (dominance in industrial manufacturing), unquestioned military superiority (above all in nuclear weapons), cheap energy, and economic policies emphasizing growth (and therefore reducing political friction) both at home and across the "Free World." Two additional factors figured in the success of this empire. The first was the fact that the world war had either brought would-be competitors to their knees or left them badly weakened – the Americans by 1945 had a clear field to reach for dominion. The second was a "postwar moral constitution" (p. 229) to which God-fearing, flag-waving, married-with-children, headed-for-the-suburbs Americans subscribed.

Above all, we had the money. In the twenty-years that followed V-J Day, writes Maier, "Americans traded wealth for preponderance." (p. 225) The empire of production worked because we were rich and everyone else knew it.

This empire reached its zenith, according to Professor Maier, around 1958. Shortly thereafter, it began to unravel. Within twenty years -- thanks to permanently negative trade balances, a crushing defeat in Vietnam, oil shocks, "stagflation," and the shredding of the moral constitution that could not withstand the successive assaults of Elvis Presley, Betty Freidan, and hippie-dopsters, along with news reports that God had died – it had become defunct.

Out of the ashes of the empire of production sprang an empire of consumption. This new empire relies on subsidized agricultural exports, computer technology, a globally admired system of higher education, pop culture, and an insatiable appetite of debt-strapped Americans to acquire ever more "stuff:" houses, cars, boats, vacations, clothes, electronic gadgetry, and so on. American consumer demand became the crucial element fueling economic activity worldwide.

Two additional factors undergirded this empire. The first was ideological self-confidence, – in essence, a conviction that history was the story of America liberating humankind. The second was vast – or seemingly vast -- military power.

Professor Maier doesn't go this far, but it's pretty clear that the chief architect of the empire of consumption was Ronald Reagan. Reagan beguiled his fellow citizens with his talk of "morning in America." Reagan funded the revival and redesign of U. S. forces in the wake of Vietnam. And Reagan the faux conservative added to our civic religion these two crucial beliefs: credit has no limits and the bills will never come due. Balance the books, pay as you go, save for

a rainy day: Reagan's abrogation of these ancient bits of folk wisdom did as much to demolish America's moral constitution as did sex, drugs, and rock-and-roll.

At any rate, by the last decade of the 20th century, it was pretty apparent that instead of having most of the money, we now sat on a growing mountain of debt. To avoid confronting the implications of that debt, we stood conventional economic thinking – the sort that had prevailed during the heyday of the empire of production – on its head. Red ink used to be bad; now, we persuaded ourselves, it was good. In earlier times, selling at a profit held the promise of prosperity; now buying on credit became the key to personal fulfillment. Whereas thrift was once a virtue, now self-indulgence has become the thing: indeed, it forms part of America's obligation to the global economy.

Professor Maier explains an overarching economic logic at work in all of this. Other nations put up with our apparent profligacy in recognition of the “public good” (p. 267) produced by American hegemony – expressed above all by an ongoing restructuring of the global economy. Underwriting American debt is the price that other nations have willingly paid “to acquire the manufacturing jobs American stockholders, if not American workers, wished to distribute abroad.” (p. 267). From a U. S. perspective, this jobs-for-debt exchange “ensure[s] domestic consumption and the smooth conversion to service and distribution occupations at home in return for diffusing sites of industrial and, increasingly, service employment abroad.” (p. 274)

Maybe so – although I'm not sure that the typical displaced American factory worker finds the conversion to service and distribution occupations quite as smooth as that quotation implies. (Besides, “service and distribution” sounds like a choice between working the counter at McDonald's or the warehouse at Wal-Mart). And you don't need to be a raving populist to wonder why it's the stockholders rather than the working stiffs who are gung ho about exporting jobs.

I don't mean to imply that Professor Maier is oblivious to the human and moral questions involved – he's not – but he appears to find the mere survival of these imperial arrangements reason enough to give them the benefit of the doubt. As he notes, “the empire of consumption could continue to function only insofar as it was not considered exploitive by too many participants.” (p. 276). Perhaps, but personally I'd liked to get a more detailed assessment as to whether the empire of consumption is indeed making “it more or less likely that the peoples of poorer nations will share in, or be excluded from, economic development and welfare.” And I'd also like to gauge its impact on the poorer people – and even the not-so-poor people -- of our own nation.

Then there is the security question: Does an American empire “make world politics more peaceful or more violent?” The argument that the empire produces peace and security rests on a specific evaluation of U. S. military power. “What gave America its hegemonic military luster,” Professor Maier writes, “was its unparalleled capacity for the projection of force from a distance and with superb accuracy.” (p. 254) In the aftermath of the Cold War, so-called “full spectrum dominance” was endowing the Pentagon with the ability to police the world, a common

recognition of American military invincibility reassuring law-abiding nations even as it intimidated would-be troublemakers.

Alas, events have exposed full-spectrum dominance as something of a fantasy, an aspiration perhaps but not a reality. The reality turns out to be more disconcerting: in places like Iraq and Afghanistan, determined insurgents equipped with post-World War II vintage weapons have denied the Americans victory and exposed the very real limits of our ability to impose our will or even to sustain a military campaign. (Under the “moral constitution” that supports the empire of consumption, fighting and dying for one’s country has become a matter of individual choice, one that attracts only a limited number of volunteers).

We are not invincible: that is the verdict already rendered by the wars launched on behalf of peace and security in the aftermath of 9/11. The implications of that verdict deserve more consideration than Professor Maier provides.

Finally there is the ideological or political question. Does empire “safeguard or subvert our domestic institutions”? In his concluding chapter -- unless I am misreading him -- Professor Maier contents himself with ambivalent speculation. On the one hand, he writes, the choice of empire could exacerbate social inequality, further distort the separation of powers, and render elections all but meaningless. On the other hand, empire might well encourage “cosmopolitanism” and “allow an ever more diverse society to persevere in growing acceptance of multiculturalism.” (p. 294) Empire could even “facilitate intervention abroad ... against human rights abuses” and renew the American “commitment to spread democracy outside the United States.” (p. 294)

Without meaning to be disrespectful, this is not good enough. The United States has pursued its “duckish” or “duck-like” course for many decades now. The arrangements that Professor Maier describes as an empire of consumption have existed at least since the 1970s. There is no need to speculate on how empire might affect American democracy; there is every need to assess how empire has affected and is affecting our democracy – the evidence continues to accumulate before our eyes.

So come on, Professor Maier, give it to us straight.

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