

The background of the cover is a classical painting depicting ancient ruins. In the foreground, a large, weathered column stands prominently, its capital adorned with intricate carvings. The column is partially covered in dark ivy. In the background, a hill rises, topped with a cluster of columns and a temple structure. The sky is a dark, moody blue-grey, and the overall scene is bathed in a soft, golden light, suggesting a sunset or sunrise. The painting style is reminiscent of 19th-century academic art.

# ENDURING EMPIRE

ANCIENT LESSONS FOR  
GLOBAL POLITICS

EDITED BY DAVID EDWARD TABACHNICK AND TOIVO KOIVUKOSKI

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# Enduring Empire

Ancient Lessons for Global Politics

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ENDURING EMPIRE:  
ANCIENT LESSONS FOR GLOBAL POLITICS

An exploration of the ways in which ancient theories of empire can inform our understanding of present-day international relations, *Enduring Empire* engages in a serious discussion of empire as it relates to American foreign policy and global politics.

The imperial power dynamics of ancient Athens and Rome provided fertile ground for the deliberations of many classical thinkers who wrote on the nature of empire: contemplating political sovereignty, autonomy, and citizenship as well as war, peace, and civilization in a world where political boundaries were strained and contested. The contributors to this collection prompt similar questions with their essays and promote a serious contemporary consideration of empire in light of the predominance of the United States and of the doctrine of liberal democracy.

Featuring essays from some of the leading thinkers in the fields of political science, philosophy, history, and classics, *Enduring Empire* illustrates how lessons gleaned from the Athenian and Roman empires can help us to understand the imperial trajectory of global politics today.

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# Preface

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DAVID EDWARD TABACHNICK  
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Words had to change their ordinary meaning and to take that which was now given to them. Reckless audacity came to be considered the courage of a loyal ally; prudent hesitation, specious cowardice; moderation was held to be a cloak for unmanliness; ability to see all sides of a question, inaptness to act on any.

Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*<sup>1</sup>

In this remarkable passage we are reminded that times of political disorder can give rise to questions about the meanings of political terms, establishing a tension between the novelties of the present and the accumulated history of past interpretations. The meaning of the term 'empire' is presently encountering such a contested interval, one that in many ways is a reflection of an imperial setting, with all of the connotations of unsettling violence and revolutionary change that Thucydides describes. Such crises of common sense represent moments of theoretical opportunity to reflect on political phenomena with a renewed openness, testing present experiences against the lessons of the past. From Thucydides to Herodotus, Cicero to Caesar, Machiavelli to Titus Livy, ancient encounters with empires contribute the critical steadiness of 2,500 years of political philosophy and history to what can be disorienting times of crisis, while enabling us to re-evaluate the tradition in a new political context.

The authors of the essays that follow consider ancient articulations of empire in an effort to better understand the meaning of empire today. The aim of this book, then, is to lay foundations of political philosophy and ancient history beneath a lively contemporary discourse on empires

– a discourse that seems to have tended towards either hyperbolic, academic condemnation or embedded, patriotic reportage, alternating sentiments of fury with those of awe, or terror, or amazement. The United States of America is now commonly referred to as an empire in the same general sense as the Roman Empire, the Athenian Empire, or the Persian Empire. But what do such diverse political organizations have in common? Here the original clear-minded reflections of the ancients can add substance to an idea that is too easily reduced to a term of either approbation or glorification. The question of whether empire is a good or bad thing for America and the world is a matter for political debates to decide. If scholarship on empire has any purpose, it is to supply the ballast of historical perspective for those debates on contemporary imperial projects, be they imagined or real.

This book raises more questions than it settles, asking not simply whether the United States is an empire, but how we are to understand empire in the first place. How can various forms of empire – tyrannical, totalitarian, hegemonic, democratic, and republican – be distinguished? What uneasy mediations can be formed between democratic republics and imperial power? What drives empires to expand, and what limits are there to an expansionist dynamic? Our authors set out to ask such political questions in a spirit of philosophic openness, while suggesting lessons about empire drawn from the study of ancient history and political philosophy. Obviously this is not just a matter of direct applications, since the circumstances for judgement and political action are varied and particular to the time, place, and people involved. Yet simply asking such fundamental questions that were not settled in the fifth century BCE (and that won't likely be settled in the twenty-first century either) encourages one to step back from the insistent demands of the present so as to moderate those political judgements that have arisen from knee-jerk reactions. If we could suggest one classical virtue of particular relevance to a time of perceived crisis such as our own, it would be moderation, and there is an element of this in the moment of calm that is prerequisite to philosophic reflections on ancient empires.

Needless to say, contemporary discussions of imperialism have been inspired by recent events in American foreign policy. The American invasion and occupation of Iraq was said to be part of broader effort to destroy the tyrannies of the Middle East and replace them with democracies. Supporters of this project argue that the United States has a moral right to force democracy upon the region. Critics say that while they

support the spread of democracy, it should be developed by indigenous populations rather than imposed by a foreign power. Both groups, however, seem to agree that for good or ill, the United States is behaving like an empire – that is, using its superior power to control and direct other countries. The question is this: How did a country founded on anti-imperialist principles become an empire?

David C. Hendrickson begins his chapter by exploring this very question. As he notes, many neoconservative supporters of the Bush administration see no disagreement between the goals of empire and those of democracy. In effect, they have co-opted the left-wing critique of American imperialism as an accurate description of American foreign policy – a policy, moreover, that merits praise. Hendrickson's account of American history reveals a long history of empire building; that said, the Bush Doctrine suggests a revolutionary new effort towards 'universal empire' or the domination by one power of the state system as a whole. According to Hendrickson, though, 'American policy ... is imperial in aim but likely to fail.' He suggests that those who craft American foreign policy would be wise to follow the example of the American founders, who, when considering the republic's future, took many lessons from ancient Greece and Rome, including these: aspire to peaceful order rather than domination; and avoid overextension abroad lest one suffer domestic decline.

Laurie Bagby continues in this vein by pointing out that ancient and modern democracies are more different than is commonly held. In part, this difference can be attributed to the fact that Athens practised direct democracy – something viewed as dangerous by the moderns. As Thucydides makes abundantly clear in *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, it was the empowered, fickle, glory-seeking, and materialistic Athenian people who led their city into both ill-advised military adventurism and domestic political infighting. From Thucydides we can learn that democracy is not itself opposed to imperialism; rather, it is modern 'liberal' democracy that opposes imperialism with its emphasis on individual rights and self-determination.

Similar to Bagby, David Edward Tabachnick compares ancient Athens with contemporary America. Ruminating on Thucydides' account of Athens' transformation from a respected regional hegemonic power into a brutal empire during the Peloponnesian War, he wonders whether we are not now seeing a similar transformation of the United States. His survey of post-Second World War American foreign policy suggests that the United States was at one time a welcomed world leader



but that its efforts to eradicate first its communist and then its terrorist enemies have seen it become far more coercive as well as interventionist in the sovereign affairs of other countries.

Ryan Balot also examines the relevance of Athens as an imperial democracy to the contemporary United States. Initially, the Athenians required courage to maintain their freedom from foreign enslavement as well as from domestic tyranny; this gave them autonomy, democracy, and (ultimately) a sense of superiority over other, 'unfree' city-states. As Balot notes, this sense of superiority led these same self-described 'courageous freedom fighters' to 'subject other Greeks to their own power.' Because of their own emphasis on freedom, the Athenians became especially sensitive to the obvious charge that they had become tyrants themselves. And because they were now so hated by the rest of Greece, they had no choice but to maintain their empire out of fear that losing it would result in their own destruction. Unfortunately, imperialistic foreign policy damaged democratic ideals at home, leading to the rise of domestic tyranny and the erosion of the very freedoms for which the Athenians had fought so bravely.

Using Herodotus as his guide, Clifford Orwin considers how the free people of the ancient world were able to defeat the much larger armies of despots. The despotic Persians based their right to rule on a belief in their own innate superiority, whereas the Hellenic peoples were motivated to fight by the far more powerful and universal idea that they were protecting their own freedom. Problematically, though, this very same impulse also led them to enslave others in order to preempt any future threats to their liberty. Put simply, what began as an effort towards self-determination and the destruction of tyranny was transformed into imperialism.

Leah Bradshaw worries about an even more profound consequence of universal empire. Her chapter begins with this provocative statement: 'Empire may be triumphant in modernity. Politics may be over.' She observes that, while ancient Athens may have inspired contemporary democracy, our now globalized world bears a far stronger resemblance to the expanding, universalistic, and materialistic character of empire than to the self-sufficient community of the Greek *polis*. Considering Aristotle's idea that we are only fully human when in the *polis*, the rise of a global empire may signal the end not only of politics but also of our very humanity.

A certain compulsiveness underlying reactionary imperialism is the topic of Toivo Koivukoski's chapter, which examines the motivations of



honour, interests, and fear, which Thucydides considered the causes of Athens' dynamic arc of expansion, overstretch, and retreat. These apparently discrete motives take on a uniquely open-ended character in an imperial republic, in which interests cannot be clearly distinguished from the state of the world as a whole, in which honour drives towards universal recognition, and in which fear is experienced as dread of civilizational collapse. The author argues that in efforts to understand the sorts of imperialist compulsions that one sees embodied in the restless spirit of, for example, Alcibiades – who was the most vocal proponent of Athens' imperial wars – something like Nietzsche's self-overcoming will to power may provide deeper insights into imperial striving than the outward motivations of fear, honour, and interest identified by Thucydides; such will to power may also explain the 'fight for the dominion of the earth – the compulsion to large-scale politics' that Nietzsche presaged would characterize post-national (i.e., global) politics.

Moving from ancient Greece to ancient Rome, Art Eckstein challenges the notion that empires must always be built and preserved through a culture of war. According to Eckstein, unlike its rivals, which were led by bloodthirsty kings, the Roman Republic mitigated the overemphasis on militarism and predatory manliness by limiting the terms of its leaders and by subordinating the personal behaviour of those leaders to the law. This bred a culture of cooperation in the centre of Rome. It was only with the rise of Caesar, ruling on the periphery of the empire beyond the pacifying influences of Senate limits and laws, that we see the rise of a dangerous authoritarian counter-culture, one that threatened the stability of the empire and that drew Rome into civil war. Thus Eckstein advises that if the United States hopes to carry out its imperial ambitions without experiencing a similar fate, it will have to impose and maintain strict limits on the power of its leaders.

In her exploration of Roman imperial power, Susan Mattern questions the notion that the empire was expanded and maintained solely through military might. Indeed, it was its ability to navigate complicated networks of alliances that made Rome such a successful political entity. Using examples from Caesar and Cicero, Mattern concludes that instead of simply physically dominating newly taken territories and peoples, Rome wisely recognized the importance and legitimacy of existing social, bureaucratic, and legal institutions, working with and through them, 'understanding both stories, that of their own nation and that of the one they are invading.'

The sometimes ruthless requirements of 'founding' raise particular challenges for republican empires. To reconcile this apparently necessary ruthlessness with a republican political philosophy, Geoffrey Kellow examines Cicero's invocation of a harmonic historical order – 'the music of the spheres' – to uplift civic spirit in the Roman Republic and to simultaneously veil its brutish origins (as in a founder suckled by wolves). Kellow views this invocation as a rite of passage on the way to a cosmopolitan project. A empire cannot claim the natural right to rule over territories based on original possession, so it substitutes an overarching historical purpose as a locus for republican civic virtues. Kellow considers whether a similar sense of historical purpose can uplift the spirit of an expanding American republic, offering Martin Luther King's appeal to the revelatory and sanctifying qualities of history as a model for the reconciliation of remembered origins and for the ideals that sustain hope for the future.

Waller Newell's chapter emphasizes the dynamic character of liberal empires. He contrasts a classical preference for the stable, relatively autonomous *polis* with Machiavelli's praise for the invigorating effects of empire building, during which times 'growth is always accompanied by danger.' There is virtue of a kind in attuning oneself to the chaotic field of happenstance that underlies a political order; that is how republics arise and empires fall. The expansionist drive to control chance and bring order to the world is what inspires liberal empires such as Rome (in the eyes of Machiavelli) or America (as Newell sees it) with a common purpose that engages individual energies in a uniquely imperial conception of civic spiritedness.

One of the noteworthy aspects of empires relates to the violent leveling that always accompanies aspirations to construct a new civilizational order. Whether these aspirations are fulfilled in a new unity of humankind, and to what extent this is so, may be a function of the limits of human comprehension and technical accomplishment. Taking as his point of departure Eric Voegelin's 1961 declaration that the 'age of empire is coming to an end in our time,' John von Heyking considers to what extent contemporary candidates for imperial status – from a supposed American Empire, to an imagined global restoration of the Caliphate, to a 'global civil society' – actually succeed in their projects of world creation. He suggests, following Voegelin, that attempts to organize humankind into a political whole amount to little more than intellectual swindles, in that they deliberately distort human participation in a divine order that no earthly analogue can stand in for. Von

Heyking suggests that even during times of crude totalitarian domination, a sense of suspense about the future remains, and that in this possibility of surprise, humankind is held out towards the possibility of participation in a beyond that is beyond human powers to control.

How imperial power should be exerted is a question that segues from the ethical towards the strategic. In practical terms, ethical priorities must be considered alongside an honest appraisal of the force necessary to address those priorities. In considering Athens' use of maritime power, Barry Strauss contends that the empire declined not so much through imperial hubris as from a lack of resolve, complicated by moral agonizing over the difficulties inherent in maintaining a Hellenic empire. Judged against the alternative – Persian domination – the Athenians' rule over a league of Greek cities seems measured, when one remembers that it brought the benefits of democracy, security, and material well-being. According to Strauss, the choice was clear: foreign despotism (Persia), or hegemonic empire (Athens). He makes the radical suggestion that Athens' mistake, if indeed it made one, was that it did not employ its naval forces decisively enough. 'If that is a morality story,' Strauss concludes, 'it is not a comforting one.'

Strauss's concluding sentiment echoes lessons learned from 2,500 years of rising and falling empires, a chronicle that registers the vicissitudes of power, the changes invited into the centres of imperial republics, and the violence visited on their fluctuating peripheries. But then, after optimism and in that moment before the pessimism accompanying tragic decline sets in, there is a purpose to be fulfilled simply in bearing witness to the changes taking place in our world with an honest clarity owed to philosophic reflection on empires past. In this apprehension of both the time-bound, fragile character of empires and their enduring legacies, there is embedded a promise that is beyond either false comforts or counsels of despair. So our reflections begin with recollection, and here with a question: What remains of ancient empires in the form of enduring lessons for understanding an imperial global politics?

## NOTES

- 1 Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, trans. Richard Crawley (London: Everyman, 1993), 3.82.

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**ENDURING EMPIRE:  
ANCIENT LESSONS FOR GLOBAL POLITICS**





# 1 In the Mirror of Antiquity: The Problem of American Empire

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DAVID C. HENDRICKSON

We have been asked to compare the experience of empire in antiquity with contemporary articulations of empire and to consider whether lessons drawn from the ancient past may shed light on the imperial trajectory of contemporary international politics. The Western imagination has long been troubled by the question of how we moderns stand in relation to antiquity; indeed, it is possible to write histories of modern political thought in terms of that question.<sup>1</sup> To think of the matter in this way is to essentially ask what we and our forebears think and have thought about antiquity; but in the way the editors of this volume have posed their own question, there is also a hint of another perspective, one that might be somewhat crassly summarized by this question: What would antiquity think of us? Put differently, are there enduring lessons in ancient political thought that speak to the present moment? Are we to be either fortified or struck down in our imperial ambitions by the wisdom of the ancients?

This chapter ventures some observations with respect to these differing approaches to the subject. The first question is whether the United States today may fairly be considered an empire. I believe the appellation to be just, though there are certainly good reasons why American policy makers do not like the term. Second, I will be examining how the contrasting experiences of Greece and Rome entered into the American imagination in such a way that the lessons drawn from antiquity formed an essential aspect of what may be termed 'the American project.' Finally, I will consider the question of American empire from the vantage point of the lessons implicit in Thucydides' masterful account of the great war between Athens and Sparta.

The American invasion of Iraq in March 2003 and the development by the Bush administration of a new national-security strategy provoked an enormous volume of commentary – a flood of books, essays, and op-ed pieces – on the theme of American empire. The terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, wrote one critic, ‘produced a dangerous change in the thinking of some of our leaders, who began to see our republic as a genuine empire, a new Rome, the greatest colossus in history, no longer bound by international law, the concerns of allies, or any constraints on its use of military force.’<sup>2</sup> The question urgently demanding attention, wrote another critic, ‘is not whether the United States has become an imperial power [but] what sort of empire [Americans] intend theirs to be.’<sup>3</sup>

It was not only critics of American foreign policy who found ‘empire’ to be the most apt label for what the United States had become. Neoconservative supporters of the Bush administration did so as well. Columnist Max Boot insisted that ‘Afghanistan and other troubled lands today cry out for the sort of enlightened foreign administration once provided by self-confident Englishmen in jodhpurs and pith helmets.’ Other neoconservatives, such as Charles Krauthammer and Tom Donnelly (the latter of the Project for the New American Century), agreed that it was time to come out of the closet on the subject of American empire. Of the supporters of the Bush’s Iraq policy, perhaps the most brazen was British historian Niall Ferguson, who not only came out of the closet but nearly burned down the house. His argument was ‘not merely that the United States is an empire but that it always has been an empire.’<sup>4</sup> Ferguson, like others, insisted that the United States should step up to the imperial responsibilities that fall to it as a conservator of world order, and he feared that it would not.

Thirty-five years ago, in the ideological heat generated by the war in Vietnam, few defenders of that war spoke of it as an imperial venture.<sup>5</sup> The charge of American empire was an indictment, an ascription of hidden intent used to encourage a repudiation of the forbidden temptation. That charge arose on the left and was condemned on the right. ‘Once,’ wrote critic Jonathan Schell, ‘the left had stood alone in calling the U.S. imperial and was reviled for defaming the nation. Now it turned out to have been the herald of a new consensus. Yesterday’s leftwing abuse became today’s mainstream praise.’<sup>6</sup>

Or so it seemed. In fact, as time went by, observers on both the right and the left developed second thoughts. The Bush administration never accepted the ‘imperial’ label and repeatedly insisted in its public