**American Imperialism? No need to run away from label**

By Max Boot

What is the greatest danger facing America as it tries to rebuild Iraq: Shiite fundamentalism? Kurdish separatism? Sunni intransigence? Turkish, Syrian, Iranian or Saudi Arabian meddling?

All of those are real problems, but none is so severe that it can't readily be handled. More than 125,000 American troops occupy Mesopotamia. They are backed up by the resources of the world's richest economy. In a contest for control of Iraq, America can outspend and outmuscle any competing faction.

The greatest danger is that we won't use all of our power for fear of the "I" word — imperialism. When asked on April 28 on al-Jazeera whether the United States was "empire building," Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld reacted as if he'd been asked whether he wears women's underwear. "We don't seek empires," he replied huffily. "We're not imperialistic. We never have been."

That's a fine answer for public consumption. The problem is that it isn't true. The United States has been an empire since at least 1803, when Thomas Jefferson purchased the Louisiana Territory. Throughout the 19th century, what Jefferson called the "empire of liberty" expanded across the continent. When U.S. power stretched from "sea to shining sea," the American empire moved abroad, acquiring colonies ranging from Puerto Rico and the Philippines to Hawaii and Alaska.

While the formal empire mostly disappeared after World War II, the United States set out on another bout of imperialism in Germany and Japan. Oh, sorry — that wasn't imperialism; it was "occupation." But when Americans are running foreign governments, it's a distinction without a difference. Likewise, recent "nation-building" experiments in Somalia, Haiti, Bosnia, Kosovo and Afghanistan are imperialism under another name.

Mind you, this is not meant as a condemnation. The history of American imperialism is hardly one of unadorned good doing; there have been plenty of shameful episodes, such as the mistreatment of the Indians. But, on the whole, U.S. imperialism has been the greatest force for good in the world during the past century. It has defeated the monstrous evils of communism and Nazism and lesser evils such as the Taliban and Serbian ethnic cleansing. Along the way, it has helped spread liberal institutions to countries as diverse as South Korea and Panama.

Yet, while generally successful as imperialists, Americans have been loath to confirm that's what they were doing. That's OK. Given the historical baggage that "imperialism" carries, there's no need for the U.S. government to embrace the term. But it should definitely embrace the practice.

That doesn't mean looting Iraq of its natural resources; nothing could be more destructive of our goal of building a stable government in Baghdad. It means imposing the rule of law, property rights, free speech and other guarantees, at gunpoint if need be. This will require selecting a new ruler who is committed to pluralism and then backing him or her to the hilt. Iran and other neighboring states won't hesitate to impose their despotic views on Iraq; we shouldn't hesitate to impose our democratic views.

The indications are mixed as to whether the United States is prepared to embrace its imperial role unapologetically. Rumsfeld has said that an Iranian-style theocracy "isn't going to happen," and President Bush has pledged to keep U.S. troops in Iraq as long as necessary to "build a peaceful and representative government." After allowing a temporary power vacuum to develop, U.S. troops now are moving aggressively to put down challenges to their authority by, for example, arresting the self-declared "mayor" of Baghdad.

That's all for the good. But there are also some worrisome signs. Bush asked for only $2.5 billion from Congress for rebuilding Iraq, even though a study from the Council on Foreign Relations and the James A. Baker III Institute for Public Policy estimates that $25 billion to $100 billion will be needed. Iraq's oil revenues and contributions from allies won't cover the entire shortfall. The president should be doing more to prepare the U.S. public and Congress for a costly commitment. Otherwise, Iraqis quickly could become disillusioned about the benefits of liberation.

The cost of our commitment will be measured not only in money but also in troops. While Bush and Rumsfeld have wisely eschewed any talk of an early "exit strategy," they still seem to think that U.S. forces won't need to stay more than two years. Rumsfeld even denied a report that the U.S. armed forces are planning to open permanent bases in Iraq. If they're not, they should be. That's the only way to ensure the security of a nascent democracy in such a rough neighborhood.

Does the administration really imagine that Iraq will have turned into Switzerland in two years' time? Allied rule lasted four years in Germany and seven years in Japan. American troops remain stationed in both places more than 50 years later. That's why these two countries have become paragons of liberal democracy. It is crazy to think that Iraq — which has less of a democratic tradition than either Germany or Japan had in 1945 — could make the leap overnight.

The record of nation-building during the past decade is clear: The United States failed in Somalia and Haiti, where it pulled out troops prematurely. Bosnia, Kosovo and Afghanistan show more promise because U.S. troops remain stationed there. Afghanistan would be making even more progress if the United States and its allies had made a bigger commitment to secure the countryside, not just Kabul.

If we want Iraq to avoid becoming a Somalia on steroids, we'd better get used to U.S. troops being deployed there for years, possibly decades, to come. If that raises hackles about American imperialism, so be it. We're going to be called an empire whatever we do. We might as well be a successful empire.

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