15. Is the USA an Imperial Power?

I

Six months ago, when I had the honor of speaking at Tutzing's other academy about U.S. foreign policy since the First World War, I began my remarks with an insight that I would like to repeat by way of introduction today:

After spending a good eight years in the U.S., five of them at the center of the New Rome, in Washington, D.C., and after several decades of research and teaching on various aspects of the history of the United States, I have come to the conclusion that all substantial books on the U.S. should have at least the same subtitle: *A People of Paradox.*

Let me mention some of these paradoxes that you may have also noticed when thinking about the United States:

- The USA sees itself as the *sweet land of liberty.* Americans are deeply imbued with their missionary idea of freedom; the USA is at the same time the land of slavery, apartheid, and deeply seated racism. Today, racism is politically incorrect, but it persists. It is embedded in the mentality and social structure of the country.

- This paradox had become institutionalized over centuries: The U.S. was and is a constitutional state, but since its founding it also codified slavery and apartheid in law, from *slave codes in the* early days, to discriminatory laws in the southern states of the U.S. that were not abolished until the 1960s by the civil rights movement and Congress.

- Most Americans are convinced that their *land of opportunity* is not a class society. Americans hate socialism like the devil, but of course the country is characterized by social antagonisms and classes.

- The USA is a country that practices a strict, constitutionally enshrined separation of church and state, but at the same time has a society

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that is deeply religious. America's path to modernity has not led to a far-reaching secularization of the country, as it has in several European countries.

- Americans believe in a hard, competitive individualism, which for several decades has been built to a large extent on pump-priming and credit; on the other hand, they own the largest foundations in the world, *charity* and *philanthropy* are part of good manners in society. Simply celebrating festivals without a good cause, especially carnival events or Oktoberfests, is considered completely immoral. I have twice initiated social events as director of the German Historical Institute in Washington, D.C., in cooperation with the German Embassy, but of course only for charitable purposes.

- In the American population, one finds an infinite amount of stupidity and inward-looking provincialism; 60% of Americans, for example, cannot find Mexico on a map. When I drove through the country for the first time in 1970/71 with an imported Volkswagen and, outside of legality, with a customs' license plate, I was asked three times at campsites how long it had taken me to drive the car from Germany. On the other hand, and this paradox already brings us closer to our topic, there is an extraordinarily well-informed and globally thinking elite (in government, in Congress, among lobbyists, in financial institutions, in law firms, in elite universities, and in think tanks) that, since World War II, thinks in global categories as a matter of course and defines the American interest as well as the American missionary idea globally.

- The majority of Americans believe that their country has never waged a war of aggression. They hold on to their missionary idea of peace and freedom and point to having brought the League of Nations and the UN to the world. On the other hand, the U.S. is a warfare state par excellence, a warfare state with unparalleled military resources and weapons systems on land, sea, air, and space—with weapons of a range unprecedented in the entire history of the world.

II

These paradoxes, and this brings me to my second argument, also pervade domestic American controversies about whether the U.S. is, should be, or should not be an imperial power. It began with the first great imperialism debate in 1898, when, after the victory over Spain, a paradox was at stake, namely, whether the U.S., which had just driven the last European colonial power out of the Western hemisphere, should now itself acquire an empire in the Caribbean, the Pacific (Hawaii), and East Asia (the Philippines). It continues with the controversial debate that has been passionately and fiercely waged since 2002, as to whether the openly proclaimed draft of a *Pax Americana during* George W. Bush's first term in office represented the draft of a hegemonic power, a world *primacy,* or even a world domination, a global empire, or, possibly, to use Herfried Münkler's central term of interpretation, the "logic of action" of an empire.

The extent to which this debate on American imperialism is permeated with paradoxes can be seen from the fact that almost no author answers the question about American empire with an unqualified "yes," but rather limits the term "empire" with qualifiers. Something, one might conclude, seems to be different about American imperialism, if it exists, in comparison to the other empires we have known.

In recent years, this topic has become a playground for theorists of empire or imperialism, who investigate the question of whether and in what sense the foreign policy of the "New Rome" can be described as imperial. I have brought you a small list of publications on this topic, including the long subtitles, so that you can already recognize a basic direction of interpretation.

In addition to the rising empire, there is the empire doomed to world power; in the literature there is the overtaxed empire, the decaying empire, and the declining empire; there is the irresistible empire, the indispensable empire, the denied empire, and the informal empire, the empire by invitation, the empire on trial, even the imperial temptation. We read of an impotent empire, an empire of human rights, a democratic empire, or an empire unsure of itself. However, there are also authors who unabashedly consider the United States an empire and simply speak of the *American Empire.*

In the third part of my talk, therefore, I would like to present what I consider to be some typical patterns of argumentation by several authors in order to give you an idea of the heterogeneity and scope of

the American imperialism debate. In the last part of my lecture, I will then not shirk from presenting my own position.

III

I begin with the father of the "New Left," who remains extraordinarily influential to this day. I begin with William Appleman Williams, whose works[1] present an almost archetypal economic interpretation of the American empire. His interpretation is centered around the market and around society, not the state. It speaks to the importance and the historical impact of Williams that he has just been honored by a special tribute in the latest issue of *Diplomatic History.*

At the center of the New Left's interpretation are the concepts of economy, expansion, and empire. Williams has formulated their basic pattern in numerous books, essays, and source editions. According to him, the U.S. has been an expansive and imperial power since its founding and still is. Until the Civil War, this expansion meant land grabs at the expense of the three old European colonial powers on the North American continent, namely England, France, and Spain, and at the expense of Mexico and the Native Americans. After the Civil War, the Industrial Revolution, and the official end of the open frontier on the North American continent, this expansion underwent a change in form and meaning. In this interpretation, American foreign policy has, since then, been and still is essentially a reflex of the liberal-capitalist economic system of the USA, which is based on external expansion out of internal economic necessity; a necessity that has always been congenially recognized by the country's decision-making elite in foreign policy.

This systemic compulsion is expressed in the incessant attempt to establish a global *Pax Americana* adapted to the trade and capital needs of this economy and to preserve it against all revolutionary movements, if necessary, by force. *"Empire is as American as apple pie,"* as Williams once put it. In this interpretation, the liberal demands of the U.S. for unhindered access to world markets, for the Open Door, for equal opportunities and equal treatment in foreign markets are formal postulates that were intended to serve, and have served, the

1 The best known is William Appleman Williams: Die Tragödie der amerikanischen Diplomatie (The Tragedy of American Diplomacy), Frankfurt a. M. 1973.

construction of an "*informal empire*" under the pretense of equality and justice, with the U.S. ruling de facto on the basis of its superior economic power. *Cuius oeconomia, eius regio.*

The trade policy tools of this strategy are, on the one hand, the permanent fight against protective tariffs and regional preferential tariff systems (with others), against trade policy bilateralism, autarkism, and protectionism, against bilateral clearing agreements and exchange controls, and, since 1923, also against, to a certain extent, the most-favored-nation clause in trade agreements, and, on the other hand, the constant demand for free exchange of goods and commodities, for free access to the world's raw materials, and for freedom of investment.

A not inconsiderable number of historians who follow Williams' explanatory pattern and/or see it confirmed by their own research have taken up the theme of counterrevolutionary and imperial America with deliberately system-critical intent and have rewritten the entire American foreign policy in this sense, *turning the Great American Success Story upside down.* Anyone who takes enough time to read revisionist authors can see this imperial America, thus defined, at work throughout the country's history.

The transition from this economic imperialism thesis to other imperialist critics, who argue more politically and morally, is fluid. The essence of these critiques usually boils down to a twofold finding: the American empire is destroying its own republic at home and the reputation of the United States throughout the world. One of the most significant critics along these lines is Chalmers Johnson in his book *The Suicide of American Democracy.*[2]

Johnson is a political scientist born in 1931 who completed his book "in the Ides of March 2003." For him, George W. Bush's administration is only the culmination of a long history of American decay. Parallel to the rise of the United States as a superpower in the 20th century, he says, there has been a perversion of American democracy, which is now heading for its "*suicide.*" The "*boy emperor*" Bush is driving his country into imperialism and militarism through his preemptive wars, true to the motto of the Roman emperor Caligula: "*Let them hate me, as long as they fear me*"; also in accordance with a literal interpretation of the Gospel of Matthew: "*He who is not with me; is against me.*" Among the woes of American society under Bush, according to Johnson, are

2 Chalmers Johnson: Der Selbstmord der amerikanischen Demokratie. (Aus d. Amerik. v. Hans Freundl u. Thomas Pfeiffer), Munich 2003.

the abdication of Congress, propaganda and disinformation, the loss of civil liberties, and the impending financial bankruptcy of the country. Johnson, in the good American tradition, concludes his jeremiad with a last-minute call to repentance.

The list of books criticizing Bush's imperial policies on the grounds of foreign policy is very long. I consider Stefan Halper and Jonathan Clarke's book *America Alone, to be a* particularly successful, fundamental critique of the neoconservative re-establishment of a *Pax Americana*.[3]

If, according to the two authors, the neoconservatives had neither a Cardinal Ratzinger nor a Marshal Suslow, neither a Curia nor a Politburo, neither a Bible nor a Koran nor a Torah, there were nevertheless common basic ideological assumptions of the neoconservative movement. The overriding goal of the neoconservatives, who might better be called "*conservative revolutionaries,*" was to establish an unrivaled *Pax Americana* for the 21st century, with the aim of systematically expanding the zones of liberal and free-market capitalist systems in the world. The United States, the neoconservatives argued, must therefore indefinitely determine the structures of the world in a pro-American sense. The primary goal of this strategy in the military sense, they said, was to make the United States as secure as possible against any attack, while at the same time leaving any part of the world open to American intervention.

Hand in hand with this militarization, according to another leitmotif of the two authors, goes the unilateralization of Washington's global policy. In the eyes of the neoconservatives, America is strong enough on its own (*"America Alone"*). They would not dream of renouncing the central element of the modern state as it has evolved since the 17th century: national sovereignty, embodied in autonomy from outside forces, political self-determination, and the ability to act unilaterally.

A very different strategy of argumentation is chosen by a slightly eccentric but extraordinarily productive and stimulating Briton, namely Niall Ferguson in his book *The Denied Empire*.[4]

His main thesis is threefold—relating to the past, present, and future of the American empire – and is as pointed as it is British: Contrary to their self-assessment, Americans have been imperialist since the

3 Stefan Halper, Jonathan Clarke: America Alone. The Neo-Conservatives and the Global Order, Cambridge 2004.

4 Niall Ferguson: Das verleugnete Imperium. Chancen und Risiken amerikanischer Macht. (Aus d. Engl. v. Klaus D. Schmidt), Berlin 2004.

founding of the Union in 1776; it is pointless to try to deny this (thesis 1). But if Americans wanted to be successful imperialists in the long run, they would have to make an ego change and become like the British were at the height of their world dominance (thesis 2). Otherwise, the American empire could soon prove to have feet of clay (thesis 3).

The book is thus backward-looking prophecy in its purest form. One could even imagine British Prime Minister Blair filling President Bush's head with similar ideas at the White House before the attack on Iraq. Ferguson is not lacking in self-awareness in other ways either. In the book's nearly 450 pages, he says he wants to compare the American empire with earlier empires, *considering "other conceivable courses of history as well as possible future developments."*

What did the British imperialists have, according to Ferguson, that the Americans did not have? Despite the incomparable military and economic strength of the—by Ferguson's count—68th empire in the history of the world, the Americans lacked the necessary self-confidence for an imperial policy; they lacked the "imperial mindset." They would finally have to stop denying what they have always been. Moreover, the U.S. political system is too fixated on the moment and the next election campaign; Americans basically act within a "narrow time horizon." As a result, he said, they have repeatedly squandered opportunities to stabilize foreign policy successes.

Moreover, unfortunately, and Ferguson shares this view with the terrorists, Americans were too afraid of death. They hoped for long life and feared early death on the battlefield. Finally, the clay foot of the "*disavowed empire*" was Washington's health and welfare system facing financial death. This book was written before 09/15, before September 15, 2008, the beginning of the global financial crisis, otherwise he would most certainly have brought the dwindling economic foundation of the American empire into the field as well.

Ferguson's action-oriented book is intended to help Americans become better imperialists, but the kind of imperialists that the British were at the height of their world dominance, namely "*liberal imperialists*" who brought to the world such vital *"public goods*" as freedom, a liberal world market, and functioning institutions in the colonies with responsible indigenous elites under British control. Ferguson leaves no doubt that he is fundamentally favorable to such liberal imperialism on the part of the United States. The contemporary world, he argues, also needs these public goods. Only the Americans, if they wanted to, would have the power to provide them for the world.

Fourthly, and finally, I would like to mention a German, the editor of Die *Zeit,* Josef Joffe, who in his book *Überpower. The Imperial Temptation*[5] basically agrees with Ferguson that the current world needs the U.S. as a stabilizing "*linchpin.*"

The core analysis of this text, in which analysis and instructions for action, is and ought, flow together, is clear and unambiguous: Despite all criticism of the imperial temptation and the monumental mistakes of the George W. Bush administration, for Joffe, the United States alone is capable of creating a minimum of stability and order for a free-market world. Washington is the "linchpin" of the world. No other power or combination of states had the potential to provide this added value for the world system. Europe is in every respect out of its depth for such a task. All it has to offer is the arrogance of impotence and an anti-Americanism that creates identity.

But in order to actually generate this added value of "*public goods*" in the coming decades, the Americans, according to Joffe, would have to distance themselves from the illusion of unipolar *superpower,* their imperial temptation, and regain the legitimacy gambled away worldwide by the Bush administration. While they did not need the world's permission to act, they did need its support to succeed. Joffe advises Washington to return to the benevolent hegemon policy of the Cold War era, to enlightened self-interest that is enlightened because it takes into account, as far as it can, the interests of others and the world at large. From the perspective of Joffe and others, President Obama is rhetorically and programmatically doing just that. The big question, of course, is whether he can carry through this vision of a benevolent hegemon in the face of enormous domestic and foreign policy opposition.

IV

This brings me to the fourth part of my talk, my own position on whether the U.S. is an imperial power.

Yes, the U.S. can be called an imperial power with good reason, despite the paradoxes in the imperialism debate and against the self-image of the American people. For almost all Americans rebel against such a self-designation. For political, cultural, and socio-psychological

5 Josef Joffe: Überpower. The Imperial Temptation of America, New York 2006.

reasons, no U.S. government can openly profess "imperialism." The will to shape the world is almost always described by the term *leadership.*

Even George W. Bush told American war veterans in 2002 that the U.S. was not seeking to build an empire, that it was committed solely to freedom "for ourselves and for others." And President Obama, in a brilliant speech to the UN a few days ago, deliberately echoed the American founding father of the UN, President Franklin D. Roosevelt. He tied the U.S. national interest into the collective action logic of the UN. Let me quote: *"[...] like all of you, my responsibility is to act in the interest of my nation and my people and I will never apologize for defending these interests. But it is my deeply held belief that in the year 2009—more than at any point in human history—the interests of nations and peoples are shared."*[6]

His speech was a call for the world to work together to meet the four great challenges of the present: nuclear nonproliferation and disarmament, peace and security, saving our planet through the wise use of resources, and mastering the economic and financial crisis. At the same time, however, and here we have another American paradox, at one point in his speech he broke out of the rhetoric of equal rights and equal responsibility by referring to American leadership: "Every nation must know: America will live its values and will lead by example."[7]

In his speech in Cairo, on June 4, 2009, Obama had become even more passionate in his rejection of the imperialism accusation: *"America is not the crude stereotype of a self-interested empire. The United States has been one of the greatest sources of progress that the world has ever known. We were born out of a revolution against an empire. We were founded upon the ideal that all are created equal and we have shed blood and struggled for centuries to give meaning to those words—within our borders and around the world."*[8]

So why is the USA—from my perspective—still an imperial power? I would like to name two main reasons for this; we can discuss possible further causes later.

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6 Barack Obama, Obama's Speech to the United Nations General Assembly. September 23, 2009. Transcript. https://www.nytimes.com/2009/09/24/us/politics/24prexy.text.html.

7 Ibid.

8 Barack Obama, Obama's Speech in Cairo. in: The New York Times, June 4th, 2009. Transcript. https://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/04/us/politics/04obama.text.html?page.

The Global Expansion of U.S. National Interest

Let me expand a little on the history of this. Since the Age of Discoveries, the rival great European powers have extended their influence over the whole world, exercising hegemony and domination. This Eurocentric world system gradually disintegrated at the beginning of the 20th century, essentially because the New World took the place of the Old. Through the expulsion of the last European colonial power from the Western Hemisphere in the Spanish-American War of 1898, through the victories in World War I, World War II, and the Cold War, the liberal, capitalist, and free-market social model of the United States has prevailed in the industrialized world of the West.

In this sense, we can call the 20th century the American century. For this has been the overriding but only apparently self-evident feature of U.S. foreign policy since its entry into World War II: the globalization of the U.S. foreign policy scope of activity, which in turn is rooted in the globalization of American interests and values. This globalization is the most important cause of the qualitative leap of the U.S. from a world power among other world powers to the superpower of the Cold War and the nuclear age. Globalization means that, for the USA, in principle, the future of the whole world, especially of the Eurasian double continent, including the Middle East, was and is of potentially vital importance; and for their vital interests the Americans will go to war if necessary. Not only the Second World War, not only the Cold World War, but also the present fight of the USA against terrorism cannot be explained without this American globalism. One can say that this globalism is America's unique selling point compared to all other empires in world history. Never before has there been a global power in the literal sense.

President F. D. Roosevelt formulated, as it were, the leitmotif of the 20th century *Pax Americana on* January 21, 1941, when he wrote to U.S. Ambassador Grew in Japan: *"I believe the fundamental task is to recognize that the struggles in Europe, in Africa, and in Asia are all parts of a single world conflict. We must therefore recognize that our interests are threatened in Europe and in Asia. We are committed to the task of defending our way of life and our vital interests wherever they are seriously threatened. Our strategy of self-defense, taking into account every front and seizing every opportunity to contribute to our total security, must therefore be global."*[9]

9 Joseph C. Grew: Ten Years in Japan, New York 1941, p. 354 f.

In substance, President George W. Bush has said the same thing over and over again since he took office in 2000. It is precisely no coincidence that this globalism is the essence of all U.S. strategic plans and security memoranda from 1941 to the present: From *ABC 1, Rainbow 5,* and the *Victory Program of* 1941, which formulated a military concept of defense, war, and victory, a kind of global forward defense in which the distinction between defensive and offensive in the *geographic* sense was blurred beyond recognition, to Memorandum *NSC 68 of* 1950, the founding strategic document of the Cold War, to the National Intelligence Council's Global Strategic Situation Assessment *"Global Trends 2015" of* 2000. This globalization is rooted in the internal conditions of the United States, the strength and flexibility of its institutions, the economic, cultural, and military importance of the country, but also in the Manichaeism of American civil religion. I will talk about this in a moment.

But this globalization of the scope of U.S. foreign policy activity also grew out of the increasing interdependence of world politics itself, including as a reaction to the foreign policies of U.S. enemies and allies, especially out of the, often exaggerated, threat perceptions that the deeds and ideologies of other states and societies evoked in the minds of Americans and their policymakers.

Within this American globalism, one can distinguish three major objectives, which, however, were not always equally balanced: First, the indivisible, liberal-capitalist world market. Second, indivisible security, that is, the maintenance of a pro-American balance in the world and the prevention of hostile hegemonic powers on the Eurasian double continent that could endanger the long-term security of the Western Hemisphere, the sanctuary of the United States. The attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon also caused a deep shock because it undermined the supreme goal of American security policy since the Monroe Doctrine of 1823. Third, and *last but not least,* indivisible freedom, that is, the worldwide imperative to promote, demand, and support democracy and representative governments resulting from free elections whenever possible.

As already indicated, these global objectives of the United States were dialectically connected with global threat scenarios: in the case of National Socialism, with the assumption that Hitler and Germany wanted to conquer the whole world; in the case of the Cold War, with the subjective certainty that communism, first in Europe and Asia, and after the globalization of Soviet foreign policy in the Khrushchev

era, also in the Middle East, in Africa, and in Latin America, would endanger all three indivisibilities. International terrorism is perceived as a new global threat.

Moreover, this imperial power has the ability to forge global coalitions of different governments and systems when necessary. "*One war at a time,*" President Lincoln had already proclaimed when the possibility of conflict with England loomed in the midst of the Civil War. Against Italian fascism, German National Socialism, and Japanese imperialism, the Americans brought together a *strange alliance.* They cooperated with the National Chinese dictator Chiang-Kai-shek and the Soviet dictator Stalin, whose rule was built on the principle of terror.

After 1945, there was a stunning reversal of American "demonology": the evil Germans, good Russians, evil Japanese, and good Chinese of World War II became the good West Germans, evil Russians, good Japanese, and evil Chinese of the Cold War. As the Cold War globalized, the U.S. supported Third World regimes and dictators when they only pretended to be anti-communist and pro-American, including Pol Pot, Saddam Hussein, and the Taliban.

After September 11, 2001, the U.S. had again succeeded in forming a global coalition, but it split after the attack on Iraq. From a European perspective, however, something crucial has changed. While the first two grand coalitions were also formed to preserve Europe's freedom, the pacified, European nation-states now come to the aid of the U.S. as marginalized auxiliary nations within the framework of a marginalized NATO. There is much to be said for the American interpretation of the 20th century: from their perspective, they saved Europe's freedom, liberated the Old World from the evils of Wilhelmism, fascism, Nazism, and communism in World War I, World War II, and the Cold War.

They were directly or indirectly involved in the downfall of European colonial empires or expansive empires in Europe. The collapse of the Soviet empire is seen by many strategists as the endpoint of a development in world history that began with the breakup of the Habsburg and Ottoman Empires, continued with the breakup of German's Third Reich and Italy's colonial empire in World War II, and ended after World War II with the painful dissolution of the empires of Great Britain and France. In addition, Spain, Portugal and the Netherlands also had to part with the remnants of their empires.

One may venture the thesis: Only because the classical European nations—with strong American support—were trimmed back to their

core countries and thus marginalized in world history, were they able to start the project of the European Union in the West and, after 1990/91, to push it forward to Central Europe, Eastern Europe, and Southeastern Europe, thus carrying out the simultaneous widening and deepening of the European Union. The eternal struggle of European nations for influence, status, and prestige is now played out by peaceful means within the European Union. The Americans are the midwife of Europe.

This U.S. globalism, as already indicated, has produced a global American military power since World War II – a power that today devours over 45% of the world's military spending; is protected domestically by an alliance of the military, the defense industry, and Congress; has over a thousand (a thousand!), partly-secret bases around the globe; can pulverize any point on earth in 20 minutes. It was given the mission after the Cold War to defend a *Pax Americana* against any combination of possible opponents for the foreseeable future and to prevent a regional hegemon in any continent from endangering this global leadership role.

The visible armed forces of the USA at sea, on land, in the air, and in space are supplemented by an invisible secret service empire, which collects information everywhere in the world with almost all means, everywhere sees, listens, and reads, possibly also here in Tutzing *(Hi there!).* A jokester has suggested to add to the state motto: "*In God we trust—all others we monitor.*"

I will not talk today about America's cultural influence in the world, its *soft power,* nor about its economic influence, the decline of which is once again predicted, as it so often has been in the past. I would just like to remind you that in 2009 the share of the USA in the world gross domestic product is 23.5%, Japan's 8.1%, China's 7.3%, Germany's 6.0%, and Russia's 2.8%.

Only an effective and united Europe could become a serious competitor. The European Union accounts for 30.3 % of the world's gross domestic product. There will be no Asian Union in the foreseeable future.

This brings me to my second main argument, my second rationale for why I think the U.S. is an imperial power.

The Civil-Religious, Divinely Legitimized Missionary Idea of Freedom

The piety deeply rooted in the history and structure of American society is also the reason why God is a central element of the national, American civil religion. At the core of this civil religion is the American trinity of God, country, and freedom. This sense-making and community-building creed, this *American creed,* holds together a fragmented and disparate society. Since the American Revolution, a fusion of Christianity and the Enlightenment, of Christianity and the democratic liberal mission, has produced America's distinctive civil religion, a distinctive blend of Christian republicanism and democratic liberal faith. America, it has been said, is a nation with the soul of a church. The American nation had no ideology; it was one.

The American culture of remembrance and the politics of its history, its national holidays and rituals, and especially presidential speeches are centered around the world of ideas and symbols of the American civil religion with a general, non-specific concept of God. The American national motto, *In God we trust,* which also embosses the back of every dollar bill, or the wording in the Pledge of Allegiance*, A nation under God,* represent almost all Americans. Terms such as *divine plan*, *providence*, *creator*, *almighty God,* or *heavenly Father are* an integral part of civil religious rhetoric.

During my time in Washington, I once managed to get a place on the Capitol steps for the 4th of July. I wanted to witness several hundred thousand Americans of European, African, Asian, and Latin American descent celebrate their National Day of Independence. I was impressed by a peculiar mixture of love of country, Hollywood, Coca-Cola, and popcorn; of praise for America's great past and the hopeful certainty that the world's only remaining superpower would continue to have a special mission to fulfill in the next millennium. I wanted to learn how these hundreds of thousands, surrounded by patriotic shrines such as the Washington Monument, the Jefferson, Lincoln and Roosevelt Memorials, honor in song and hymn the American trinity of God, country, and freedom; how this nation of immigrants, all of whom had emigrated to the New World from somewhere at some time, always reconstitutes itself on such feast days, giving permanence and a future to its founding myth of the *"sweet land of liberty."*

The debate about America's special mission of freedom, its relationship to God, providence and history has been going on since the

first settlers arrived around 400 years ago. This ongoing discourse, as we would say today, about the special mission of the United States, its uniqueness and chosenness, is itself part of the core of American identity. That is why it has been said that if you scratch an American long enough, the *redeemer* will emerge.

This civil-religious missionary idea of freedom has enabled Americans to justify all wars and military interventions in their history, from the Indian Wars to the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, as just war, as *bellum iustum.* This is exactly what President Obama did again during the speech accepting the Nobel Peace Prize in Oslo. There is evil in the world that must be fought if necessary.

Herfried Münkler has rightly recalled an old insight that all empires have an ideology of peace, and in the case of the United States, an ideology of freedom.

Setbacks and defeats have never prevented Americans from bidding farewell to this missionary idea. As is well known, the vast majority of American attempts to establish democratic regimes through or after military interventions and to consolidate them in the long term have failed. According to one study of 16 such attempts in the 20th century, only four to five, in West Germany, Japan, and South Korea, with some prototypes in the small states of Grenada and Panama, have been successful. Successful means that ten years after the withdrawal of U.S. troops, democracy still existed. From this perspective, too, the democratization of the old Federal Republic is one of the greatest success stories of U.S. foreign policy in the 20th century. It is no coincidence that President Bush constantly made comparisons with Germany and Japan in the run-up to the Iraq War.

This comparison will almost certainly prove false. Iraq, as well as Afghanistan, will add to the long list of failed American attempts to bring freedom to peoples and states by force: South Vietnam, Cambodia, Haiti, Cuba, and Nicaragua.

But that will not prevent the USA from trying again and again. For it is part of the essence of secular utopia that, like religion, it does not allow its utopian surplus, its core of hope, to be destroyed by bad reality and sorry facts.

This also applies to America's civil-religious missionary idea of freedom. The hope for a better future, the belief in a new chance, progress, and the improvement of the human race characterize this sense of mission. George W. Bush also belongs to the generations of Americans who interpret the history of their own chosen people as a success story

toward ever more freedom. He by no means is outside of the American historical tradition in this respect; there are large, common intersections with his predecessors, from Woodrow Wilson to Bill Clinton and to his successor, Barack Obama. President Obama again faces the great American paradox of how to combine America's global interests and claim to global American leadership with America's missionary idea of freedom and with its multilateral rhetoric of global cooperation.