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On Proconsular Leadership

They that dig foundations deep,
Fit for realms to rise upon,
Little honour do they reap
Of their generation . . .
Rudyard Kipling[1]

In spite of the often bitter disputes among Americans of different political persuasions over the nation's ongoing struggles in Iraq and Afghanistan, it would probably be widely agreed that the difficulties the United States has encountered in the Middle East since the events of September 11, 2001, are not simply a reflection of policy failure in Washington. Some of them may have been unavoidable, or a function of the "fog of war," or for that matter simple bad luck. Yet political-military decision-making by American officials in the field has also left something to be desired. This was most clearly the case in Iraq in the immediate aftermath of U.S. military operations there in mid-2003.[2] At the same time, in at least one conspicuous case – the "surge" in American ground forces in Iraq in 2007 – a dramatic improvement in American fortunes can be traced primarily to the initiative, strategic vision, and operational virtuosity of the American field commander, General David Petraeus. Recently, in a time of great uncertainty concerning the future of the American involvement in Afghanistan, Petraeus was given a further opportunity to provide what can fairly be described as national leadership in meeting a fundamental and

[1] Rudyard Kipling, "The Pro-consuls" (1905), a eulogy of Lord Alfred Milner, British High Commissioner of South Africa, 1897–1905.

[2] For accounts of this period from several contrasting viewpoints, see Thomas E. Ricks, *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq* (New York: Penguin, 2006); Ali A. Allawi, *The Occupation of Iraq: Winning the War, Losing the Peace* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007); L. Paul Bremer III, *My Year In Iraq* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006); and Douglas J. Feith, *War and Decision: Inside the Pentagon at the Dawn of the War on Terrorism* (New York: Harper, 2008).

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daunting challenge to the security interests of the United States, its friends and allies, and the international community as a whole.

What role do or should subordinate officials have in providing national-level or strategic leadership? What scope do they actually have for independent action? What is the relationship between such officials and their superiors, and how should that relationship be managed? These are the fundamental issues this study sets out to address. Remarkably little thematic attention has been paid to them in the relevant academic and policy-oriented literature of recent times. There seem to be a number of reasons for this. Perhaps the most significant is the lingering influence within American social science of the distinction between "policy" and "administration." This distinction, traceable to an essay of Woodrow Wilson's of the late nineteenth century, was originally intended to have normative force – that is, it was supposed to lay the groundwork for a new, more professional, and less political approach to public administration than that previously obtaining in the United States. Over time, however, it has leached into the mental picture that academics and practitioners alike tend to hold of the actual workings of policy-making in contemporary democracies. According to this understanding, policy and administration are sharply distinguished, with subordinate officials seen as mere implementers of decisions taken at the higher policy or political levels of the government.[3]

There can be little doubt that in other societies and earlier historical epochs, the situation was rather different. In feudal societies, the higher nobility generally controlled extensive territories and commanded military forces personally loyal to themselves. Such men were political leaders in their own right, not merely administrators, and their political interests and concerns had to be taken into account by their feudal overlords if their cooperation was to be ensured. In extensive empires such as those of Persia, Rome, China, the Ottoman Turks, and the Spanish Hapsburgs, covering vast areas and with primitive communications at best, control could only be sustained by delegating extensive authority to local officials. These officials often became powerful magnates in their own right, and their loyalty could not always easily be commanded. Particularly in times of weakness or turmoil at the imperial center, these men often went into business for themselves, sometimes ruling autonomously in return for a pro forma acknowledgment of imperial suzerainty, sometimes proclaiming actual independence, and at other times attempting to seize power at the center for themselves. Our English-language political vocabulary has been enriched by a number of terms designating essentially this phenomenon: "satrap" (an ancient Persian word), "viceroy" (of Spanish origin), and – of comparable terms the one clearly enjoying the most currency today – "proconsul."

The word "proconsul" derives from a Latin phrase meaning "in place of a consul." In the Roman Republic of classical times, executive power was wielded

[3] Woodrow Wilson, "The Study of Administration" (1887), in Frederick C. Mosher, ed., *Basic Literature of American Public Administration, 1787–1950* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1981).

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by two annually elected officials known as consuls. In the course of Roman expansion in central Italy during the fourth century BC, the Romans discovered that it could be highly inconvenient to recall a consul in the middle of a military campaign after his term of office had expired, particularly as the military requirements of an expansionist foreign policy were becoming more and more demanding. The solution they hit upon was to create a new type of official capable of substituting for a consul in a major military command, that is to say, one endowed with the prestige and authority of high political office and an ability to take important decisions on his own responsibility. Roman proconsuls under the Republic were therefore never mere administrators, although their freedom of action might vary significantly according to circumstances. Some of them, at any rate, were surely statesmen by any description. If there is a single simple way to characterize proconsular rule in general, it would perhaps be this: delegated political-military leadership that rises in the best case to statesmanship.[4]

To describe a subordinate official of a contemporary democracy as a proconsul is generally not intended as a compliment. A proconsul is typically thought of today as a powerful official of high military or political rank in a remote territory who uses his power in an independent, unauthorized, or high-handed fashion. This negative connotation no doubt reflects in some measure the role that powerful dynasts of consular or proconsular rank – notably, Julius Caesar – played historically in the wreck of the Roman Republic in the first century BC. Is there then no legitimate role for proconsular leadership in the world today? The answer to this question is by no means evident.

There are a number of reasons for thinking that proconsular leadership is not really possible today, at any rate in the advanced democracies. In the first place, contemporary democracies are virtually by definition states that abide by the rule of law and a constitutional order that firmly subordinates military to civilian authority. Second, what might be called the bureaucratic character of contemporary democracies constrains the behavior of subordinate officials in ways that effectively check proconsular-type ambitions, which tend to thrive only in traditional aristocratic societies like that of classical Rome. Finally, modern communications have largely overcome the tyranny of distance that made older empires so vulnerable to the ambitions of local governors.

The sociologist Max Weber famously distinguished three varieties of legitimate modes of governance in world history: traditional, rational-legal, and charismatic. In this formulation, "rational-legal," or bureaucratic, governance is the dominant mode in the modern world; "traditional" governance

[4] Consider Sir Henry Taylor, *The Statesman*, ed. David Lewis Schaefer (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1992 [1842]). This neglected work, the earliest treatise on public administration in modern Britain, makes the case that delegated leadership in some circumstances may well qualify as a form of policy leadership or statesmanship. For the concept of statesmanship or statecraft generally see Carnes Lord, *The Modern Prince: What Leaders Need to Know Now* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003).

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characterizes older, more personalized aristocratic societies; and "charismatic" governance is personalized rule based on the appeal of a religion, ideology, or individual personality.[5] Yet it is not difficult to see that these "ideal types" are by no means mutually exclusive. While the bureaucratization of government in recent times is a phenomenon that should not be underestimated, it should also not be exaggerated. It is striking to what extent the traditional order persisted even in Europe well into the twentieth century, and still today survives in parts of the world in thinly disguised bureaucratic garb. It would also be a mistake to underestimate the possibilities of charismatic leadership today, not least in the advanced democracies. It is perhaps sufficient to say that human nature remains more of a constant in political life than is allowed by Weber's formulation. Consider, notoriously, the case of General Douglas MacArthur. MacArthur was an American aristocrat who consciously modeled himself on the political and military heroes of Roman antiquity. More than that, and what made MacArthur potentially dangerous, was a charismatic political presence that held wide popular appeal and could well have vaulted him into the White House.[6]

The case of MacArthur is sufficient to show that modern democracies have not completely solved the problem of civil–military relations. There seems little reason for the United States or any other well-established democracy today to worry about the prospect of a military coup (although it might be recalled that some French generals attempted one against Charles de Gaulle as late as 1962), but the unique culture of military organizations and their estrangement from the civilian world, even – or rather particularly – in contemporary democracies remains a constant source of policy disagreements and personal friction and misunderstanding.[7] A perhaps surprising dimension of the problem is the political profile of military proconsuls. On more than one occasion, MacArthur used the prospect of his candidacy for the presidency on the opposition ticket to intimidate his commander in chief and enhance his own proconsular freedom of action. Though admittedly an extreme case, MacArthur's situation was not unique in the American record. In very recent years, this issue has reemerged on the scene in the person of General David Petraeus.

As for the second argument, the basic point is that the bureaucratization of contemporary life that is so obvious in the experience of ordinary citizens is much less operative at senior levels of government. Senior American officials in particular are, to be sure, enmeshed in a complex web of congressionally mandated studies, internal strategy reviews, presidential directives, and public policy documents that might seem to preclude any real freedom of action for

[5] Max Weber, *Economy and Society*, ed. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich, 2 vols. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), II, ch. 14.

[6] See especially Michael Schaller, *Douglas MacArthur: The Far Eastern General* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

[7] See, e.g., Eliot A. Cohen, *Supreme Command: Soldiers, Statesmen, and Leadership in Wartime* (New York: Free Press, 2002).

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individuals other than those at the very top. Yet the reality of all this is much less than meets the eye. The American national security bureaucracy remains unusually decentralized and fragmented. Partly because of the sheer scope of the responsibilities facing those at the helm of the world's only surviving superpower, the attention the top policy-makers are able to accord any single problem is limited no matter how pressing or important. Even when a policy decision is made, it is often not really made, but remains open to continuing challenge depending on the external circumstances and the shifting alliances of the bureaucratic players involved. The autonomous role of Congress in the American political system adds a further element of uncertainty, providing as it does a ready avenue for executive officials to obstruct or circumvent normal policy channels. Further, disciplining officials for perceived failure or for less than cooperative or even insubordinate behavior is difficult and tends to be avoided wherever possible, given the political complications it usually entails.[8] Even within the military, where discipline and respect for the chain of command are more integral to the institutional culture, the sacking of generals or admirals is rare. The relief of General Stanley McChrystal as senior American commander in Afghanistan in 2010 is a striking exception to this rule.[9] A final and related point is the role of the contemporary media in distorting the workings of bureaucratic processes in democracies today, and again particularly the United States. General Douglas MacArthur was a careful student of the press and used it to full advantage to increase his political profile at home and strengthen his independence of action. He learned this from an earlier American proconsul, General Leonard Wood.

Thirdly, there is the question of communication between governments and their proconsuls. It is natural to assume that the scope for proconsular leadership was drastically diminished by the invention of virtually instantaneous electronic communications in the course of the nineteenth century. The key development here was the laying of transoceanic telegraph cables beginning around mid-century, which allowed Great Britain in particular to reduce from weeks or even months to hours the time necessary to communicate with the far-flung officers of its empire. The fact of the matter, however, is that Britain's most memorably independent-minded proconsuls actually postdate this development. Personalities, leadership style, and organizational relationships all contribute to the proconsular phenomenon. And more important than the technology of communication itself, it can be argued, are the protocols and practices that structure communication and the problem these are designed to

[8] For a revealing account of bureaucratic infighting in Washington at the time of the invasion of Iraq, see Feith (then Under Secretary of Defense for Policy), chs. 8–9, 14. See more generally Carnes Lord, *The Presidency and the Management of National Security* (New York: Free Press, 1988).

[9] McChrystal was cashiered for derisive comments about senior civilian officials purportedly made by the general or his staff to a reporter. The relative frequency of firings of senior military personnel by then-current Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates very much reflects his own leadership style rather than any shift in this area in the culture of official Washington.

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avoid – communication content that is vague, misleading, contradictory, or simply muddled. For an understanding of intragovernmental communications today, it is vital to grasp the net loss in intellectually disciplined staff work caused by growing reliance on casual email exchanges and PowerPoint briefings. Although this is certainly not unique to the United States, it is almost certainly more advanced here than elsewhere. One has only to sample the archives of American political-military decision-making during and after World War II – or, for that matter, British diplomatic dispatches at any time in the nineteenth century – to sense the secular decline in the basic clarity and strategic logic of American intergovernmental communications today. An unintended consequence of this is a weakening of bureaucratic constraints on our proconsular leaders.

None of this is meant to suggest that MacArthur is the typical (and still less the "ideal type") American proconsul. It is rather to argue that there has been more scope for proconsular leadership on the American political stage in the past than is generally recognized. Nor is this necessarily a bad thing. The leadership deficits the United States has had to face recently in the Iraq and Afghan theaters are nothing new. Similar problems plagued the American effort in Vietnam in the 1960s and 1970s, although this fact has tended to be overshadowed by the gross errors that marked the military dimension of that war. At the same time, however, it is also clear that they are not somehow an inevitable by-product of the structure of the American government or of American political culture. If Iraq and Vietnam seem to point to the inability of the American Republic to carry out a classic imperial policy abroad, other episodes in the American experience point in the opposite direction. American military officers in a proconsular role – MacArthur himself most notably – achieved startling success during the occupation of Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan after World War II, as well as in earlier undertakings such as the reconstruction of Cuba (1898–1902) and the long American occupation of the Philippines (1898–1936) following the Spanish-American War. In fact, though, even Iraq and Vietnam are not simply examples of American proconsular failure. Indeed, both are unusually instructive cases because they tell a mixed story, one that enables the observer to understand the underlying causes of both failure and success in proconsular leadership in a single operational theater.

This is a study, then, in what may be called, with all due qualification, imperial governance. Its focus, however, is not on imperial leadership as such or the central machinery of imperial governance, but rather on the manner in which central authority is exercised on the imperial periphery by subordinate officials. More specifically, we are interested in subordinate officials of a certain type – not simply imperial administrators, but consequential leaders who contributed importantly to the formulation and execution of policy on the marches of empire. For the sake of convenience and clarity, we shall refer to such officials as proconsuls in the proper sense of the term. Proconsular leadership calls for

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the exercise of statecraft of a high order – indeed, sometimes of the highest order, if the founding of what are (in effect if not in name) new states or regimes can be considered the highest task of statecraft. Part of its scope is suggested by the contemporary terms "nation-building" and "stability and reconstruction operations." Perhaps most characteristically, it involves in some combination the instruments of both political and military power. Indeed, its most difficult challenge is the proper coordination of these instruments. It faces secondary but scarcely less daunting challenges, however, with respect to material resources, economics, and finance, as well as ethnicity, religion, and culture – the latter a potentially explosive arena that empires too frequently neglect at their great peril, as the recent American experience in Iraq attests.

It is perhaps advisable to step back here to address the vexed question of how "imperialism" as a contemporary as well as a historical phenomenon should be described and assessed. It can be predicted with a high degree of confidence that this study will not be greeted with enthusiasm by those who resent the role of American power in the world today and see no difference between the behavior of the United States in its dealings with lesser states and that of the conquering territorial empires of times past. Let it be said as clearly as possible at the outset, then, that it is not the purpose of the present work to provide a brief either for imperialism generally or for American imperialism in particular. Nor, for that matter, does it accept the idea that there actually is an "American Empire." The vocabulary of "empire," "proconsul," and similar terms is used throughout this study as a literary and heuristic device and for stylistic convenience, and is in no way intended as an adequate substantive characterization of what is being discussed, let alone as an endorsement of it. Having said this, however, I find myself obliged to note that I do not find everything associated with imperialism – especially the "liberal imperialism" of Britain but even the imperialism of ancient Rome – irremediably evil or without useful positive lessons for contemporary democracies. If that were the case, this book would not have been written.

To clear the conceptual decks before proceeding, it will perhaps be well to offer a brief discussion of the meaning of "empire" and the considerations that can lead one to conclude that the United States is not an empire in any useful sense of that term. In the course of this discussion I will contrast my own perspective with that of Niall Ferguson, a leading proponent of an imperial role for the United States in the world of today. I begin with an account of another empire of classical times, that of Athens, the world's first democracy.[10]

After the Athenians led a coalition of willing Greek city-states in a successful war of resistance against the invading Persian Empire early in the fifth century BC, they remained for decades thereafter the *hegemon* ("leader") of

[10] What follows draws on Carnes Lord, "Dreams of Empire," *Claremont Review of Books* (Fall 2004): 11–12. On Athenian imperialism see, for example, Michael Doyle, *Empires* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986), ch. 3.

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a maritime-oriented alliance designed to control the waters of the Aegean and thus contain Persian power. Initially, most of the allied cities, even very small ones, contributed ships to the coalition's naval forces. As time passed, however, and with the acquiescence if not encouragement of the Athenians, cash subsidies came to replace actual military forces as the allied contribution to the common defense. Gradually, too, as the Persian threat came to seem less immediate, the allies grew restive with Athens' sometimes heavy-handed leadership, particularly when the Athenians appropriated league funds for a major public works building program at home (we owe the Parthenon to it, among other things). Eventually, Samos, one of the more powerful of these allies, rose in revolt against Athens; it was subdued only after a lengthy and bitter struggle. From this point on, it was clear to all that the nature of Athens' leadership in Greece had taken a fateful turn: what began as hegemony had ended in "empire" (*archê*, meaning simply "rule").

There are certainly suggestive parallels between this ancient history and the evolution of the Atlantic Alliance under the leadership of the United States following World War II. Particularly interesting is the complicity of the allies themselves in the drift toward empire, reminding one of the long decline in the military capabilities of NATO Europe relative to the United States and its growing psychological dependence on America as the global security provider. It is also worth emphasizing the relatively mild character of the Athenian empire. Many of Athens' dependencies were democracies that were friendly to the metropolis for ideological reasons and looked to it for support against internal political opponents; but even non-democratic cities tended to enjoy a high degree of political autonomy.

At the same time, the fundamental difference between Athens and America is clear. The allies of the United States have both "exit" and "voice" to a much greater degree than did those of the Athenians. The United States never sent the Sixth Fleet against France when it withdrew from the military component of NATO in the 1960s or opposed the invasion of Iraq in 2002, as the Athenians sent their navy against the Samians. Nor, of course, has the United States sought to plant or acquire colonial dependencies (with exceptions relating primarily to the Spanish-American War), as did the Athenians, the Romans, and especially the European maritime powers of modern times. Most tellingly, when the United States did engage in territorial conquest, notably in Europe and in the Pacific in the course of the Second World War, it showed no interest in permanent domination or exploitation of these areas (unlike the Athenians, for example, in their invasion of Sicily, or its own quasi-imperial rival, the Soviet Union); rather, its policy was to rebuild and rehabilitate them as part of a broad alliance of democratic states that came to be known as the Free World. From this point of view, it has to be said that a great deal of the current talk about an emerging American "empire" is simply lacking in elementary historical perspective and represents a gross misuse of language.

Is the United States really an empire in any meaningful sense? Niall Ferguson, one of the most distinguished younger historians writing today, answers

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this question with an emphatic yes.[11] Ferguson denies that there is any real distinction between hegemony and empire. The fact that the United States, unlike conventional empires, has for most of its history eschewed direct rule of foreign peoples is not sufficient to deny it the name of empire, for as the British (or, for that matter, the Romans) showed, imperial rule can also be indirect – rule exercised through native elites or through the promotion of extreme economic dependency, as in the case of British financial domination of Chile and Argentina in the nineteenth century.[12] From the earliest days of the republic, Ferguson contends, Americans had "intimations" of empire, albeit an "empire of liberty," in Thomas Jefferson's well-known phrase. Washington himself called it a "nascent empire." That the new nation would expand was a foregone conclusion as early as July 1776, when the Continental Congress rejected a proposal to set western boundaries for the states. Although dollars and diplomacy contributed as much to the acquisition of its vast territories as military force, the United States was far from hesitant to take up arms against Indians, the Mexicans, or other inconvenient claimants to those lands. And from an early period it was also clear that America's "manifest destiny" would be pursued beyond its own shores, especially in Central America and the Caribbean and later in the Pacific. The Monroe Doctrine signaled the nation's intention to establish a hegemonic sphere of influence in Latin America. The acquisition of Hawaii in 1898 marked the beginning of an openly imperial phase. More typical, however, and of greater relevance for the present, was the growing involvement of the United States in the political and economic affairs of Mexico and other countries in Central America and the Caribbean early in the twentieth century in an effort to foster good government and protect perceived American interests in the region. As President Theodore Roosevelt put it in his "Corollary" to the Monroe Doctrine (1904): "Chronic wrongdoing, or an impotence which results in a general loosening of the ties of civilized society, may . . . ultimately require intervention by some civilized nation." Although American enthusiasm for nation-building and democratic development in places like Nicaragua, Cuba, and Haiti did not long survive the realities encountered there, the strategy of "dictating democracy" has retained at least latent appeal throughout the American political class as the best way to deal with international troublemakers and failed states.

For Ferguson (an economic historian by trade and a Briton), the United States is in a deep sense the successor to the British Empire as part of a larger enterprise he calls "Anglobalization." The "liberal empire" established by the

[11] Niall Ferguson, *Colossus: The Price of America's Empire* (New York: Penguin, 2004). See also his *Empire: The Rise and Demise of the British World Order and the Lessons for Global Power* (New York: Basic Books, 2002).

[12] Ferguson, *Colossus*, 8–12. The distinction between empire and hegemony is accepted by Doyle but denied by various other commentators either explicitly (Chalmers Johnson, *The Sorrows of Empire: Militarism, Secrecy, and the End of the Republic* [New York: Henry Holt, 2004], 30) or implicitly (Henry A. Kissinger, *Does America Need a Foreign Policy? Towards a Diplomacy for the 21st Century* [New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001], 325 ff.).

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British differed qualitatively from previous empires. Though careful not to airbrush Britannia's warts, Ferguson rightly emphasizes Britain's role in promoting global free trade and economic development and disseminating liberal political ideas and institutions. Winston Churchill once characterized British imperialism in this way: "[to reclaim] from barbarism fertile regions and large populations . . . to give peace to warring tribes, to administer justice where all was violence, to strike the chains off the slave, to draw the richness from the soil, to plant the earliest seeds of commerce and learning, to increase in whole peoples their capacities for pleasure and diminish their chances of pain. . . ." In suitably updated language, Ferguson thinks, this could serve equally as an advertisement for contemporary American foreign policy.

Ferguson's case is in many ways persuasive, yet it seriously overstates the continuities between America and imperial Britain. He fails to emphasize sufficiently, for example, the extent to which American continental expansion was driven by individuals rather than the state, as well as the resistance consistently and for at least a time successfully shown by a succession of Congresses toward various annexationist projects (Canada, Texas, the Dominican Republic, Samoa, Hawaii, Cuba, the Philippines). Although many of Britain's imperial acquisitions were no doubt undertaken in part for defensive reasons, this was more clearly the case for the United States. Further, the republican character of the country made it very difficult for Americans to hold alien peoples in permanent or even semi-permanent subjection, as the Philippine experiment so plainly showed. Finally, while the processes of "Anglobalization" are certainly real, it is less clear in what sense these processes are inherently imperial or imperialistic. To speak, as Ferguson does, of Britain's "imperialism of free trade" or America's "imperialism of anti-imperialism" begins at some point to drain this term of all useful meaning. In any event, Ferguson himself goes on to argue that whether or not the United States is objectively an empire, Americans are reluctant, not to say inept imperialists. Americans are imperialists "in denial;" they still cling to an antiquated vision of their country as the slayer of empires. America is hobbled in its imperial mission by three "deficits": an economic deficit, a manpower deficit, and an attention deficit. Ferguson is excellent on the economic dimension of modern so-called imperialism, noting that, contrary to the notion popularized in the 1980s by the historian Paul Kennedy,[13] America is far from suffering from "imperial overstretch": For the United States today (and the same was true for Britain in the nineteenth century), the cost of empire is remarkably low. The United States currently fields the mightiest army in the history of the world for a very modest fraction of its gross national product. The real problem is the nation's unbridled appetite for consumption and its apparent entrapment in an upward spiral of social welfare costs. Americans have, in other words, little interest in sacrificing personal comfort for the honor of ruling the world.

[13] Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* (New York: Random House, 1987).

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