

# MESOAMERICA

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## **Empire vs. Democracy: Why Nemesis Is at Our Door**

*By Chalmers Johnson*

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History tells us that one of the most unstable political combinations is a country—like the United States today—that tries to be a domestic democracy and a foreign imperialist. Why this is so can be a very abstract subject. Perhaps the best way to offer my thoughts on this is to say a few words about my new book, *Nemesis*, and explain why I gave it the subtitle, “The Last Days of the American Republic.”

*Nemesis* is the third book to have grown out of my research over the past eight years. I never set out to write a trilogy on our increasingly endangered democracy, but as I kept stumbling on ever more evidence of the legacy of the imperialist pressures we put on many other countries as well as the nature and size of our military empire, one book led to another.

Professionally, I am a specialist in the history and politics of East Asia. In 2000, I published *Blowback: The Costs and Consequences of American Empire*, because my research on China, Japan, and the two Koreas persuaded me that our policies there would have serious future consequences. The book was noticed at the time, but only after 9/11 did the CIA term I adapted for the title—“blowback”—become a household word and my volume a bestseller.

I had set out to explain how exactly our government came to be so hated around the world. As a CIA term of tradecraft, “blowback” does not just mean retaliation for things our government has done to, and in, foreign countries. It refers specifically to retaliation for illegal operations carried out abroad *that were kept totally secret from the American public*. These operations have included the clandestine overthrow of governments various administrations did not like, the training of foreign militaries in the techniques of state terrorism, the rigging of elections in foreign countries, interference with the economic viability of countries that seemed to threaten the interests of influential American corporations, as well as the torture or assassination of selected foreigners. The fact that these actions were, at least originally, secret meant that when retaliation does come—as it did so spectacularly on September 11, 2001—the American public is incapable of putting the events in context. Not surprisingly, then, Americans tend to support speedy acts of revenge intended to punish the actual, or alleged, perpetrators. These moments of lashing out, of course, only prepare the ground for yet another cycle of blowback.

### **The Choice Ahead**

By the time I came to write *Nemesis*, I no longer doubted that maintaining our empire abroad required resources and commitments that would inevitably undercut, or simply skirt, what was left of our domestic democracy and that might, in the end, produce a military dictatorship or—far more likely—its civilian equivalent. The combination of huge standing armies, almost continuous wars, an

ever growing economic dependence on the military-industrial complex and the making of weaponry, and ruinous military expenses as well as a vast, bloated “defense” budget, not to speak of the creation of a whole second Defense Department (known as the Department of Homeland Security) has been destroying our republican structure of governing in favor of an imperial presidency. By republican structure, of course, I mean the separation of powers and the elaborate checks and balances that the founders of our country wrote into the Constitution as the main bulwarks against dictatorship and tyranny, which they greatly feared.

We are on the brink of losing our democracy for the sake of keeping our empire. Once a nation starts down that path, the dynamics that apply to all empires come into play—isolation, overstretch, the uniting of local and global forces opposed to imperialism, and in the end bankruptcy.

History is instructive on this dilemma. If we choose to keep our empire, as the Roman republic did, we will certainly lose our democracy and grimly await the eventual blowback that imperialism generates. There is an alternative, however. We could, like the British Empire after World War II, keep our democracy by giving up our empire. The British did not do a particularly brilliant job of liquidating their empire and there were several clear cases where British imperialists defied their nation’s commitment to democracy in order to hang on to foreign privileges. The war against the Kikuyu in Kenya in the 1950s and the Anglo-French-Israeli invasion of Egypt in ’56 are particularly savage examples of that. But the overall thrust of postwar British history is clear: the people of the British Isles chose democracy over imperialism.

In her book *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, the political philosopher Hannah Arendt offered the following summary of British imperialism and its fate:

“On the whole it was a failure because of the dichotomy between the nation-state’s legal principles and the methods needed to oppress other people permanently. This failure was neither necessary nor due to ignorance or incompetence. British imperialists knew very well that ‘administrative massacres’ could keep India in bondage, but they also knew that public opinion at home would not stand for such measures. Imperialism could have been a success if the nation-state had been willing to pay the price, to commit suicide and transform itself into a tyranny. It is one of the glories of Europe, and especially of Great Britain, that she preferred to liquidate the empire.”

I agree with this judgment. When one looks at Prime Minister Tony Blair’s unnecessary and futile support of Bush’s invasion and occupation of Iraq, one can only conclude that it was an atavistic response, that it represented a British longing to relive the glories—and cruelties—of a past that should have been ancient history.

As a form of government, imperialism does not seek or require the consent of the governed. It is a pure form of tyranny. The American attempt to combine domestic democracy with such tyrannical control over foreigners is hopelessly contradictory and hypocritical. A country can be democratic or it can be imperialistic, but it cannot be both.

### **The Road to Imperial Bankruptcy**

The American political system failed to prevent this combination from developing—and may now be incapable of correcting it. The evidence strongly suggests that the legislative and judicial branches of our government have become so servile in the presence of the imperial Presidency that they have largely lost the ability to respond in a principled and independent manner. Even in the present moment of congressional stirring, there seems to be a deep sense of helplessness. Various members

of Congress have already attempted to explain how the one clear power they retain—to cut off funds for a disastrous program—is not one they are currently prepared to use.

So the question becomes, if not Congress, could the people themselves restore Constitutional government? A grass-roots movement to abolish secret government, to bring the CIA and other illegal spying operations and private armies out of the closet of imperial power and into the light, to break the hold of the military-industrial complex, and to establish genuine public financing of elections may be at least theoretically conceivable. But given the conglomerate control of our mass media and the difficulties of mobilizing our large and diverse population, such an opting for popular democracy, as we remember it from our past, seems unlikely.

It is possible that, at some future moment, the U.S. military could actually take over the government and declare a dictatorship (though its commanders would undoubtedly find a gentler, more user-friendly name for it). That is, after all, how the Roman republic ended—by being turned over to a populist general, Julius Caesar, who had just been declared dictator for life. After his assassination and a short interregnum, it was his grandnephew Octavian who succeeded him and became the first Roman emperor, Augustus Caesar. The American military is unlikely to go that route. But one cannot ignore the fact that professional military officers seem to have played a considerable role in getting rid of their civilian overlord, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld. The new directors of the CIA, its main internal branches, the National Security Agency, and many other key organs of the “defense establishment” are now military (or ex-military) officers, strongly suggesting that the military does not need to take over the government in order to control it. Meanwhile, the all-volunteer army has emerged as an ever more separate institution in our society, its profile less and less like that of the general populace.

Nonetheless, military coups, however decorous, are not part of the American tradition, nor that of the officer corps, which might well worry about how the citizenry would react to a move toward open military dictatorship. Moreover, prosecutions of low-level military torturers from Abu Ghraib prison and killers of civilians in Iraq have demonstrated to enlisted troops that obedience to illegal orders can result in dire punishment in a situation where those of higher rank go free. No one knows whether ordinary soldiers, even from what is no longer in any normal sense a citizen army, would obey clearly illegal orders to oust an elected government or whether the officer corps would ever have sufficient confidence to issue such orders. In addition, the present system already offers the military high command so much — in funds, prestige, and future employment via the famed “revolving door” of the military-industrial complex -- that a perilous transition to anything like direct military rule would make little sense under reasonably normal conditions.

Whatever future developments may prove to be, my best guess is that the U.S. will continue to maintain a façade of Constitutional government and drift along until financial bankruptcy overtakes it. Of course, bankruptcy will not mean the literal end of the U.S. any more than it did for Germany in 1923, China in 1948, or Argentina in '01-'02. It might, in fact, open the way for an unexpected restoration of the American system—or for military rule, revolution, or simply some new development we cannot yet imagine.

Certainly, such a bankruptcy would mean a drastic lowering of our standard of living, a further loss of control over international affairs, a sudden need to adjust to the rise of other powers, including China and India, and a further discrediting of the notion that the United States is somehow exceptional compared to other nations. We will have to learn what it means to be a far poorer country—and the attitudes and manners that go with it. As Anatol Lieven, author of *America Right or Wrong: An Anatomy of American Nationalism*, observes:

“U.S. global power, as presently conceived by the overwhelming majority of the U.S. establishment, is unsustainable. . . The empire can no longer raise enough taxes or soldiers, it is increasingly indebted, and key vassal states are no longer reliable. . . The result is that the empire can no longer pay for enough of the professional troops it needs to fulfill its self-assumed imperial tasks.”

In Feb '06, the Bush administration submitted to Congress a \$439 billion defense appropriation budget for fiscal year '07. As the country enters '07, the administration is about to present a nearly \$100 billion supplementary request to Congress just for the Iraq and Afghan wars. At the same time, the deficit in the country's current account—the imbalance in the trading of goods and services as well as the shortfall in all other cross-border payments from interest income and rents to dividends and profits on direct investments—underwent its fastest ever quarterly deterioration. For '05, the current account deficit was \$805 billion, 6.4% of national income. In 2005, the U.S. trade deficit, the largest component of the current account deficit, soared to an all-time high of \$725.8 billion, the fourth consecutive year that America's trade debts set records. The trade deficit with China alone rose to \$201.6 billion, the highest imbalance ever recorded with any country. Meanwhile, since mid-2000, the country has lost nearly three million manufacturing jobs.

To try to cope with these imbalances, on March 16, '06, Congress raised the national debt limit from \$8.2 trillion to \$8.96 trillion. This was the fourth time since George W. Bush took office that it had to be raised. The national debt is the total amount owed by the government and should not be confused with the federal budget deficit, the annual amount by which federal spending exceeds revenue. Had Congress not raised the debt limit, the U.S. government would not have been able to borrow more money and would have had to default on its massive debts.

Among the creditors that finance these unprecedented sums, the two largest are the central banks of China (with \$853.7 billion in reserves) and Japan (with \$831.58 billion in reserves), both of which are the managers of the huge trade surpluses these countries enjoy with the United States. This helps explain why our debt burden has not yet triggered what standard economic theory would dictate: a steep decline in the value of the U.S. dollar followed by a severe contraction of the American economy when we found we could no longer afford the foreign goods we like so much. So far, both the Chinese and Japanese governments continue to be willing to be paid in dollars in order to sustain American purchases of their exports.

For the sake of their own domestic employment, both countries lend huge amounts to the American treasury, but there is no guarantee of how long they will want to, or be able to do so. Marshall Auerback, an international financial strategist, says we have character in the Tennessee Williams play *A Streetcar Named Desire*) heavily dependent on “the kindness of strangers.” Unfortunately, in our case, as in Blanche's, there are ever fewer strangers willing to support our illusions.

So my own hope is that—if the American people do not find a way to choose democracy over empire—at least our imperial venture will end not with a nuclear bang but a financial whimper. From the present vantage point, it certainly seems a daunting challenge for any President (or Congress) from either party even to begin the task of dismantling the military-industrial complex, ending the pall of “national security” secrecy and the “black budgets” that make public oversight of what our government does impossible, and bringing the president's secret army, the CIA, under democratic control. It's evident that Nemesis—in Greek mythology the goddess of vengeance, the punisher of hubris and arrogance—is already a visitor in our country, simply biding her time before she makes her presence known.

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