

America: Republic or Empire?

An ISI/Cicero's Podium Debate at Georgetown University

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Opening Remarks of James R. Stoner, Jr.

Thanks to ISI for arranging and to Georgetown University's Tocqueville Forum for hosting our debate this evening on the topic, "America: Republic or Empire?" I've been assigned—to tell you the truth, I eagerly grasped—the affirmative: "Is America a republic or an empire?" *Yes*. That isn't hard to say: we're both, free at home and powerful abroad. If someone asks me, "vanilla or chocolate?" there, too, I can answer, "yes." I like both—but if they are about to scoop, I'd be flippant to say so, for of course I'm being asked to choose. Here in Washington, across town—to those who know the geography of the city I'd say, across Rock Creek—questions are asked with political urgency and often answered with partisan predictability, but here at this university, in the old port that antedated the District of Columbia, I would hope we have the leisure to consider some of the complexities of our question, to put it into historical and even philosophical perspective, even as we use the format of debate to sharpen our thinking. What does it mean to our liberty—to our individual freedom on the one hand and to our capacity for self government on the other—that we bear the responsibilities of leadership in the world at large? Can we be great and also free? That is the proposition to which I would answer "yes."

In my opening remarks this evening, I want to defend American engagement abroad on three grounds. First, we were forced into a position of world leadership by the events of the 20th century, where we heroically rebuffed attempts at world domination by murderous totalitarian regimes. Second, American power at home and abroad is a force for stability and freedom in world affairs today, not to be sure imposing a pall of fear and quiet, but encouraging development informed by the principles of liberty, equality, and enlightenment. Third, American engagement abroad opens ample opportunities for our citizens, not only to acquire wealth but to perfect their talents and offer their gifts to the wider world. Let me proceed through these in turn.

First, American leadership, like the Athenian empire in the ancient world, emerged through the successful prosecution of a war we did not start, but from which we did not shirk. I'm referring to World War II, since it is only in the aftermath of that colossal global struggle that we secured the permanent military bases abroad that occasion the charges of imperialism. We had, so to speak, been abroad before at the head of a winning coalition, in the First World War, whose stalemate was broken in part by American entry and whose peace was at once written under American auspices and crumbled due in part to American intransigence. From the naïve conception that a disinterested league of nations would forestall military aggression itself, in turn renounced by civilized powers, Americans learned that in world affairs as in domestic ones it was folly to rely on parchment barriers. After World War II, we kept our armies in Europe, not only until sound governments were established in successor states and twice-

conquered neighbors, but even, in diminished numbers, to the present day—and of course the same was done in Japan and on the continent of Asia. A vast structure of international institutions was built on American initiative as well, to integrate world economies and promote global trade and development. The Marshall Plan for European recovery was the first, most famous, and probably most successful of these; avoiding the fate of post-World War I Europe, where economic crisis fueled political radicalism, Western Europe began an unprecedented era of peace and prosperity under the umbrella of the dollar and American arms.

No sooner had victory over the Nazi empire been achieved than our erstwhile ally in that battle, the Soviet Union, claimed many of the peoples of Eastern Europe for an empire of their own. Armed with an ideology of world conquest under the guise of Revolution, ruled by a tyrant as brutal as Hitler, commanding with its allies the better part of the world's largest continent and intimidating Europe, Soviet Russia was a formidable opponent of American influence around the world, posing by its ideology a challenge to the promise of democracy and by its arms and police an obstacle to the peaceful commerce and communication of peoples around the globe. Although some at the time denounced America as imperial for leading the free world against this repressive empire, in the event the architects of the Cold War were vindicated: once we found the confidence to reinvigorate our market economy and the free inventiveness it rewards, the faith to revitalize our ancient solidarity, and the courage to name the USSR as the “evil empire” it was, the thing collapsed without conflagration. Ask the peoples who lived under that empire whether American actions were, to them, imperial. By the testimony of their voices and their feet, the answer is a resounding “No.”

Now it could be said in retelling this tale that I have left out much in American history that shows American engagement abroad was not always triggered by noble defense of liberty against tyrannical totalitarianism. We conquered our own continent as an empire of liberty, civilizing the wilderness at the price of taking the reins of power from less able hands. When the opportunity presented itself after the brief Spanish American War of 1898 to take colonies overseas in the fashion of the Imperial Europeans, we made our own experiment of it, not without debate beforehand and remorse after. As the monuments in our cities and at our universities still attest, we fought World War I in the spirit of a secular crusade, and reaped the crusader's consequence: defeat of our long-run objectives, though a certain wisdom about the limits of human strength. But that last point is my response to this objection. In retrospect, all these experiences were critical to our successful performance of our world-historical task as a nation: breaking the bonds of totalitarianism. Since my point here has been to explain the growth of American world leadership, I will save for any later discussion whether our current war against violent jihadism is an extension of that historic task.

So much, then, for my first point. My second in a way follows from it: American power at home and abroad is a force for stability and freedom in world affairs. One of the lessons of the aftermath of World War I, learned—with the help of the rise of Soviet pressure—after World War II, is that a hasty retreat from a necessary battle can create a situation in which, as the saying goes, having won the war, we lose the peace. By keeping our military forces abroad in Europe and Asia and by continuing and developing international trade—stepping into the vacuum left by the exhaustion of the British empire to police the seas, always the precondition, often unacknowledged, of global trade—the United States has anchored the stability of what we can

still call the post-war world. The Marshall Plan, mentioned above, became a kind of paradigm of American policy when at its best: recognizing that our interest as a people is generally served when others thrive, provided, of course, that those others share the consensus of civilized peoples. The economic explosion of the years since the collapse of Soviet communism, especially though not exclusively in Europe and Asia, is in one sense the triumph of a principle that goes back to the time of the American Founding, the hope that, under a benevolent law of nations, commerce might knit together the interests of all mankind. Nor by commerce do I refer only to wealth and economic trade: on that foundation, science has become a truly international phenomenon, and through the infrastructure of worldwide telecommunications, information and ideas dart around the globe—in different languages, to be sure, but most especially in ours. Not only protection of property rights, but ample freedom of speech and expression, makes this possible, and while that, like all good things, is not without abuse, still no one who thinks about it doubts that the stability of American constitutionalism keeps this free exchange vital and possible. Indeed, amidst all the instability of a rapidly changing world, the ability of our political order to remain steady in a context of sometimes extreme freedom and genuine change—something we share with our fellow Anglophone polities in North America, Britain, and “down under”—helps to anchor the entire world system. I don’t say this to brag, and certainly not to make some archaic racial claim—on the contrary, among the things America does is model a truly interracial society—but I simply ask you: look and see if this is not the case.

I realize that some would take this point further than I do—insisting on an American policy to extend democracy to all peoples as soon as possible and as far as possible. Here I am making a more modest point: recognizing the limits of the possible, we engage abroad in support of liberalization and constitutionalism, helping encourage the foundation for democratization when we can, but nevertheless acting always with an eye to the spread of liberty. I realize, too, that others think America is in a phase of decline, finding herself overextended militarily and economically and then outbid or outfoxed by the Europeans and the Chinese. This last is the argument of a long article published this last weekend in the *New York Times* by Parag Khanna of the New America Foundation, which envisions a world of three superpowers—Europe, China, and the US—bidding for economic world dominance or at least for overlapping spheres of influence. His argument is interesting, but I think deeply mistaken—partly for its exclusive focus on relative wealth and its indifference to justice and liberty, partly for its zero-sum way of thinking. We never set out to be the world’s only superpower, but have always sought to exercise our influence by empowering others, not oppressing them. Our relationship with China has that character, and though particular interests of ours have been promoted by it—a thorn to the Soviets once, a hedge against runaway inflation later—we have long encouraged them, as before we encouraged our erstwhile enemy, Japan, to bring their virtues to the global marketplace. That generosity we famously show in the face of natural disasters abroad we show as well in our most basic policy: to keep that peace in which all honest men and women can live and prosper.

My final point is implicit in the foregoing: our engagement abroad, our choice to be a great republic, not a little one, opens opportunities for our citizens, not only to acquire wealth—though it does that and we all benefit from it, at least those of us who live off others’ endowments—not only for wealth, but for the cultivation of talents and natural gifts. We see this in many fields of endeavor: the best and the brightest, and in athletics the tallest and the

strongest, come to our shores, and we eagerly match our skills with theirs in friendly though intense competition, indeed we often make them our own, admitting them to citizenship and acknowledging their contributions. This, too, our founders saw from the beginning and encouraged; in culture and achievement we are to be, if not a school to all mankind, at least its finest playing field. We take pride in this and celebrate it: there is an ambition to human greatness in the American heart.

In the first book of Plato's *Republic*, a character named Cephalus tells a story of the great Athenian leader, Themistocles. "When a Seriphian [that is a man from an island so small and inconsequential that even its frogs and foxes were said to be dwarfs] abused him—saying that he was illustrious not thanks to himself but to the city—he answered that if he himself had been a Seriphian he would not have made a name, nor would that man have made one had he been an Athenian." This displays the virtue of *magnanimity*, of greatness of soul, and I think no small part of the value of what some provocatively call the American empire is that it summons that virtue from us Americans, not least when we act as citizens and leaders, deliberating our role in world affairs. I agree with Thomas Aquinas—magnanimity without justice is not even a virtue—but I have not conceded the injustice of the American empire but on the contrary have asserted its just claims. What I can say with great certainty is that *small-mindedness*, though it pretends to be humility, is, in a people already great and powerful, a source of corruption and a vice.