

The Financial, Political, and Moral Deficits of the American Empire



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In 1965, when we were ratcheting up our intervention in Vietnam, Lyndon Johnson said we had enough resources for both “guns and butter.” In response, the great American journalist Walter Lippmann wrote a column in which he said that he didn’t know whether we had enough *financial* capital for both, but he was sure we didn’t have enough *political* and *moral* capital to fight a war in Vietnam and a war on poverty. He turned out to be absolutely right.

Economic historians still debate Johnson’s decision not to raise taxes to pay for the war in Vietnam and thus to continue the illusion that the war could be paid for without any inconvenience. But clearly we did not have enough political capital to fight both a foreign and a domestic war at the same time.

In the early twenty-first century, the war and post-war in Iraq have diverted money from domestic spending. But we should all be clear and remember that this “diversion” didn’t start with September 11 or when we decided to go to war against Iraq. The erosion of domestic spending in public investment for such things as jobs, public health, public education, and physical infrastructure started a long time ago. The process has been led by Republicans but abetted by many Democrats. Indeed, I would date the beginning of this trend to the second half of Jimmy Carter’s term.

When Bill Clinton said the “era of big government is over;” he was *not* telling the truth; certainly, our defense apparatus is as “big government” as you can possibly get. Of course, we all know that he wasn’t talking about the big *military* being over but rather any big effort to deal with our domestic problems. The effect was to take the heart out of a serious domestic agenda. So the erosion of the domestic public sector is not something that just started; we face a long-term crisis in the funding of public-investment programs that make the economy stronger, distribute the wealth more equitably, and provide opportunities for people at the bottom.

The present economic problem is the burden of sustaining a continued role as the world's policeman, dedicated to repressing any movement, anywhere in the world that appears to threaten the hegemonic authority of American business and political elites. This policy was set out in the American government's September 2002 National Security Strategy.

It is true that we reconstructed Germany and Japan after World War II. But they were both first-world nations to begin with. Since then, the U.S. record has been dismal. Just look at conditions in our backyard—Central America and the Caribbean. A half-century after the Eisenhower government overthrew the democratically elected government in Guatemala, that country is an economic and social basket case.

Look also at our experience in Iran in the 1970s. The Central Intelligence Agency engineered a coup against the previous government and then championed the new Shah as a great modernizer. First on the agenda was modernizing agriculture, turning over small farms to agribusiness. This resulted in uprooting masses of people from their villages and sending them to the cities, where they became bitter, impoverished supporters of radical Islam. We don't seem to have learned anything from that experience. As a matter of fact, the discussions about how to rebuild Iraq and what to do in Afghanistan seem to me more simplistic today than the discussion was in 1978.

The United States has neither the financial capital nor the moral capital to pursue the National Security Strategy of September 2002. Pursuing that strategy would eventually require a substantial sacrifice by the American middle class. And that, of course, is the political trigger. Sadly, we have long since learned that what you do to poor people has limited political consequences. However, when you start touching the security of the middle class in a sustained way, then there is trouble.

MORTGAGING THE FUTURE

It is, in part, a matter of simple arithmetic. The government's tax cuts of recent years are already mortgaging the future. If the tax cuts were to remain, by 2011 they would require an 80 percent cut in all domestic programs of the federal government, most of which affect the middle class. That is politically impossible. Our political system is headed for a crash just on the budgetary track alone.

The tax-cut burdens would come on top of problems that this economy already has. Currently the American economy is floating on a consumer-spending bubble. As the government admonished us to do, we went to the malls after September 11, and we are still shopping. We are still shopping because we are still borrowing. Consumer credit is at an all-time high, and it continues to grow. It is a matter of simple arithmetic that people cannot forever continue to buy at a rate that rises faster than their income.

Unfortunately, the stock market bubble of the 1990s will not come back for a long time. It takes decades before investors forget the pain of seeing some \$10 trillion in assets disappear. It also takes a long, long time before the overinvestment in excess capacity that was created by the stock market boom gets absorbed. Moreover, the conditions that created the corporate scandals associated with the deflated stock market have not been cleaned up. Some fines have been levied and promises to behave better have been made, but very little has been done to change the basic regulations that govern corporate finance in America. The problems remain, and investors know that. Whatever happens to the stock market, it is not going to go back to the levels that we saw in the late 1990s for a long time.

For a while, the unsustainable boom of the last half of the 1990s hid the general job and financial insecurity that has been spreading throughout the United States over many years. Economic mobility in America has been declining, not just for people in poverty but for average working people whose jobs are insecure, whose health care is insecure, whose education for their children is insecure. Access to education tells us a lot about the kind of society we are building. The price of a college education is going up very rapidly. As a result, we are beginning to see the creation, or the re-creation, of class divisions as children become more trapped in the conditions of their parents. A recent study showed that 65 percent of the difference in income among people of the same generation is now explained by the income of their parents. That is, if you grow up poor, you have a 65 percent chance of remaining poor. The same study compared mobility in the United States with European countries that the media tell us have societies flooded with welfare that undercuts economic mobility. Yet welfare states like Finland and Sweden have greater economic mobility than the United States.

Another economic issue that is emerging is the chronic balance-of-payments problem. U.S. trade deficits are growing every year. The U.S. savings rate is very low, so we are not able to finance our own deficits. We are financing the deficits by borrowing and selling assets overseas. You don't have to be a Ph.D. in economics to understand that you cannot keep borrowing forever in order to consume.

Before the mid-1980s, we were paying for the trade deficits with income and wealth derived from foreign investments abroad. But as the deficits continued, our national liabilities have outpaced our assets. The United States' foreign debt now covers about 22 percent of our gross domestic product. Goldman Sachs thinks it is going to be 40 percent in another three or four years. This, too, is unsustainable.

Just as there has been little reform of domestic financial markets, there has been little reform of global financial markets. After the global financial crisis of 1997, many assertions were made about international rules to prevent the flow of short-term "hot money" from destabilizing, vulnerable economies. Little of significance has been changed, but the Bush administration's security agenda simply assumes away these vulnerabilities.

Recent American policy also has assumed that the economic policies pursued with such vigor by the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the U.S. Treasury over the last two decades are paths to prosperity and democracy. Yet by any reasonable measures they have failed. Global growth in the last twenty years has been half of what it was in the previous twenty years. Distribution of income *among* countries has worsened, and the evidence suggests that by and large the distribution of income and wealth *within* countries has also worsened. So in terms of what was promised, in terms of what would be a sensible evaluation of any kind of program, our present global development policy of socialism for the rich and free enterprise for the poor has not worked.

So we have underlying economic problems that will make us—in the long term—unable to afford the kind of empire that the administration wants to impose. We can't afford both empire and democracy.

SENSIBLE ECONOMIC POLICIES

Economics is not as complicated as economists would like us to think it is, and a sensible set of economic policies is not a great mystery. We pretty much know what we need to do to make the American economy work better. We need to repeal the tax cuts of recent years; we need to have national health care; we need to have a long-term energy plan; and we especially need to help state and local governments. A list of common-sense policies wouldn't take three minutes to compile.

Globally, we need a grand bargain between nations of the North and South, in which the South accepts enforceable human rights and labor standards appropriate to different levels of development and the North accepts an obligation for sustained capital investment in these countries.

We also need coordinated economic policies among the major economies—especially Europe, Japan, and the United States—in order to expand and sustain global demand.

Putting policies on paper is not difficult; the *politics* are the problem. In the United States we have a two-party system, but one party, the Democratic Party, is not working. It is a dysfunctional institution.

One of the measures of a dysfunctional institution is that it does not act on what it knows.

For example, the leadership of the Democratic Party knew early in 2001 that the Republicans were going to try to coopt their economic issues with a tax cut, which was called a "job stimulus." The Democrats were passive, and the Republicans got credit for sending a \$300 rebate to every taxpayer.

The experience taught the Democrats that they needed an economic program for the November 2002 election. But they couldn't come up with anything mean-

ingful. As one congressional staffer said, “Yes, we had a lot of these meetings, but every time somebody came up with a good idea, it was turned down—because it was either going to cost money or offend some political contributor.” If these are the criteria the Democrats use to guide alternative economic policy, all the meetings and task forces in the world will not help them.

THE DOMESTIC CONSEQUENCES OF THE QUEST FOR EMPIRE

Building on these economic and political assessments, let us turn to the American quest for empire and its domestic consequences. Specifically, in this section I want to suggest that viable alternatives to the empire’s domestic policy have not been offered; an alternative plan to address fear has not been articulated; domestic support in America for imperialism is not new; the domestic benefits of empire accrue to the ruling class and corporations; and there is a domestic limit to the empire’s resources.

Viable Alternatives to the Empire’s Domestic Policy Have Not Been Offered

Some Democrats are hoping that the postwar occupation of Iraq goes away and that the issue of the United States in the world goes away—so that they can get back to talking about the economy.

But this will not be so easy; for one thing, the Republicans are systematically taking domestic issues away from the Democrats. Take education, for example. The polls still show that people think the Democrats are a little better on this issue. But the Democrats have to be a *lot* better.

Along similar lines, Republicans got credit for the recent Medicare bill. I think this Medicare bill was a mistake on many counts. It was ineffective, and whatever benefits were provided will not appear until 2006. Moreover, it was designed to open the door to privatization. Yet there is an impression in the mind of much of the public that the Medicare legislation was a step forward. So some of the issues which many people thought would help the Democrats may be off the table or at least neutralized.

What we learned in 2002 was that fear trumped the economy. The Democrats repeated to themselves, “It’s the economy, stupid.” That was true in 1992 and 1996, and it should have been true in 2000. Unfortunately, it was not.

But remember, in the election of 2002, the United States had lost two million jobs in two years. There was a huge corporate scandal that involved crooked CEOs, which voters tend to identify more with Republicans than with Democrats; yet the Democrats lost the Senate, did not win back the House, and generally had a poor day.

An Alternative Plan to Address Fear Has Not Been Articulated

Part of the problem is that Democrats have no real story that deals with the fear that has permeated the electorate since September 11. Their domestic story about security is “spend more money.” It is probably true that we should spend more money. Certainly we shouldn’t be spending *less* money to help the states and localities deal with issues of homeland security. But it is hardly a dramatic and winning program to propose simply increasing the budget. The average voter doesn’t have the time or information to sort out the exact budgetary needs.

The international story the Democrats had recently was also problematic. In effect, most had agreed it was a good idea to invade Iraq. Their criticism was that the American government’s attempts at diplomacy failed to get enough international support. Actually, however, when you think of the circumstances, the American government did pretty well at diplomacy. The majority of the British people were against the war, yet we got Tony Blair to come out and support it. The majority of the Spanish people were against the war, yet the United States got President Aznar to agree to come out and support it. The proposition that the problem was diplomacy, rather than policy, has not been very convincing for the average American citizen.

If you believe that Saddam Hussein was a direct threat to the United States, what difference did it make in the end if the United Nations supported the war or not, or if anybody else supported it or not? If it was justified for the United States to make this unprovoked and preemptive strike on another country, violating international law, then what difference did it make what kind of coalition we put together? The typical American citizen doesn’t believe that the United Nations is going to protect him or her from al Qaeda. So, if you agree with conservatives that the war has made Americans safer, whether America had a coalition or not is quibbling around the edges for most voters.

In part, that’s why a majority of Americans still support what we did in Iraq. You don’t have a fundamental debate among the elites on this issue. Many American elites—Democrats as well as Republicans—agree with the notion that the United States is responsible for the world and have convinced Americans that the only way that you can be protected against another September 11 is to have the U.S. military crush everything suspicious that moves. In the absence of any other framework, like the one Gary Hart proposes in chapter 1, why not? The present framework also obviously happens to be a road to wealth and power for the ruling class.

For other Western elites, there are advantages to the United States being responsible for the world. Europeans, for example, don’t have to spend so much money on defense. For the developing world elites, it’s an opportunity for access to American wealth and power, just as during the Cold War, the U.S. government was willing to spend money in order to get their support. The United States is now doing the same in its demand to be exempt from the authority of the international court.

There is no reason for any other government in the world to support this demand except money—in the form of military and economic aid.

Domestic Support in America for Imperialism Is Not New

The American imperialism of recent years is built on the past. It didn't arrive in 2001. For a long time the Cold War motivated the United States to take an aggressive posture in the world. It overthrew governments in Iran, Guatemala, Chile, Indonesia, and other countries. Morally right or wrong, effective or not, these actions were supported by most Americans as essential in the war against communism. The Cold War has been over for more than ten years, but the imperial habits of the American policy class did not disappear. During the 1990s, its imperial habits continued in an economic forum. The use of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, the creation of the World Trade Organization, and the passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement were all efforts of the U.S. government to impose certain social, political, and economic forms on other countries.

The kind of imperialism that Bob Rubin and Bill Clinton pursued is much different from the more recent kind of imperialism we have seen; it is less violent, gets us into less trouble, didn't get us into quagmires, and we could get out. We could pull the money, write off the loan. But this form of imperialism is not necessarily morally superior to the other. For example, when Clinton's Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright, was asked on public television about the 500,000 children who were estimated to have died in Iraq during the sanctions, she replied, without hesitating, "We think it's worth it."

Much poverty, massive suffering, and social dislocation arise from our self-declared right as a superpower to impose our will on the rest of the world, even before 2001. It helps answer the question of why the Democrats are so ambivalent on Iraq and the issue of empire. It's because much of their policy establishment agrees with it. They might not like the tactics, the crudeness at the United Nations, and the boycotts of French wine, but basically they agree.

The Benefits of Empire Accrue to the Ruling Class and Corporations

It is important to distinguish political interests and class interests in politics. Politics, as a famous American political scientist once said, is a question of "who gets what," and you can't understand that unless you have an understanding of who is who.

We understand this issue a lot better in the domestic realm. Any observer of American politics can see, at least in broad strokes, the interests of labor, capital, poor people, and the middle class. They can understand the interests of coal companies and agriculture, the interests of California and Maine. But when it comes to foreign

affairs we don't have the information and language that allows us to identify class issues. Open up any newspaper or magazine and you will read the phrase "United States interests" or "national interests" over and over. When it comes to thinking about the globe, there is just one unit of analysis, and that's the country. Yet our experience of domestic politics is that there are important agendas that cross subnational state and city borders. They used to say, "Politics stops at the water's edge," and when you're at war, that certainly makes sense. But in a globalized economy, where capital and ownership and economic and financial interests are transnational, does it make sense for us to still assume that there is a rock-bottom thing called "American interests" that covers all or most Americans?

Several years ago, American public television aired *Commanding Heights*, a program based on Daniel Yergin's book. One segment was about the expansion of trade, and Laura Tyson, Bill Clinton's chair of the Council of Economic Advisors, was interviewed. She said the reason the Clinton administration wanted to expand trade was to give "our" corporations access to other markets.

If you are the typical American viewer, that might sound pretty good. You might assume that helping our corporations would also help you. Yet look at how our corporations think of themselves. As long ago as 1959, a Ford Motor Company executive said in a Senate hearing, "Well, Senator, we're not exactly a United States corporation. When we're in the United States, we're a United States corporation. When we're in Germany, we're a German corporation. When we're in Brazil, we're a Brazilian corporation."

The disconnect between economic institutions that have seemingly American names and the way that they operate in the world is not a secret. You can read *Business Week*, read the *Wall Street Journal*, and talk to businesspeople. They see the world as their market. They see the world as the place where they produce, and they may or may not be headquartered in the United States. If they are located here, they may or may not be in another ten years. Their words, their own speeches, clearly indicate that they think of themselves as world corporations.

So what does it mean that the U.S. government is protecting "our" corporations? This language creates an illusion of a linkage between the interests of American citizens and multinational corporations that has been broken for years. It obscures the class issues attendant on a globalizing economy. Here in North America, for example, we have one common market covering the United States, Canada, and Mexico. In this common market, is it so clear that the interests of the average Mexican worker are closer to the interests of the average Mexican billionaire than they are to the average American or Canadian worker?

In our domestic political discourse, we recognize class interests, but this sort of analysis stops at the borders. Yet the *Economist*, *Business Week*, and the *Financial Times* tell us we are increasingly living in a borderless society. If that is true, then we must start thinking about class interests in a way that is different.

The assumption that global politics is just a function of nation-state interests has obscured the influence of the oil business in our invasion of Iraq. This may not be the only reason we went to war in Iraq, but I will assert that it was one reason. When you ask the typical American voter about this, they are a little embarrassed that we've gone to war to secure this oil and make sure that we can run our sport-utility vehicles and air conditioners and other wasteful uses of energy. But the conclusion usually is that we may be wasteful, but that is just who we are. From this selfish perspective, it appears that there was a national interest in securing Iraqi oil.

In fact, there is a world market for oil. After the 1970s, the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries understood that the oil in Saudi Arabia, Venezuela, Iraq, and everywhere else had no value unless it could be sold to consumers in the United States, Western Europe, and elsewhere. The companies that end up expanding Iraqi oil production are not going to earmark it for American customers. They will sell it to whoever will pay the price. Thus, to the extent that oil was a motivating factor for the invasion of Iraq, it was about securing oil and the opportunity to sell oil for people who are in the oil business—those whom Laura Tyson would include as “our” corporations. Any benefit for the average American voter or consumer is purely coincidental.

The decision to invade Iraq was not just motivated by economics. Power itself is a motivator. But again—power for whom? It makes some Americans excited to watch American power demonstrated on television. But who actually gets to exercise that power? Typically, it's the people who are part of the policy establishment. The secretary of defense dominates any room in the world when he walks in because he represents American power, the American Army, and the American Treasury. At a conference in Germany during the Cold War a German businessman said to me, “Don't ever forget that when General Electric walks into the room, the Sixth Fleet walks in with it.” Economic and military power are connected.

But what power does the average American citizen get from all this? The benefits of the game of empire for the average American in whose “interests” all this is being pursued are slender, but the costs are great: job opportunities lost, taxes to pay now or later. The American government may retain the recent tax cuts, but the average American, of this and the following generation, will pay through the nose for those cuts. Already, older people are stretched because of the high price of prescription drugs and the lack of national health care. It has been four decades since the Head Start program began, and less than half of all eligible poor children are funded. And now the typical American is earning the world's hatred to boot.

A decent American society would be one in which everyone has access to affordable health care and everyone has access to a decent house. A society that could deliver those simple things is really incompatible with the notion of American empire, both the Republican version and the Democratic version.

The United States is not going to change from the outside. It's really up to everybody who is an American to change it or it will not be changed. Iraq is a wake-up call for how dangerous it can be when elites are allowed to pursue their own interests and cover up their agendas with rhetoric about natural interests and the myth of American exceptionalism.

There Is a Domestic Limit to the Empire's Resources

A while back *Harper's* published an article titled "The Romance of Empire." It is worth reading. The author, Thomas de Zengotita, started off with a quote from an American general saying to the effect that "Of course we can take over this country. We are Americans."

I know what it feels like to think that we Americans are different from everyone else—to think that we are more competent, honest, and moral. And to think that therefore only America can secure the world. This is arrogant and dangerous, both for us and for the world. It's dangerous for us because we do not have the resources or the will to do what we boast that we will do.

After the invasion of Iraq, an American general said it was going to take hundreds of thousands of troops to pacify Iraq. The reaction from the American government was "that's nonsense." Years ago I spoke to a military man about an invasion of Cuba. He said we would need 500,000 troops just to occupy that relatively small island that is only about ninety miles from Key West. I don't know what our resource needs eventually will amount to in Iraq, but this is a huge undertaking; and it was undertaken under the obscurity and the fog of this notion of American exceptionalism.

It is also dangerous for the world because we don't have the knowledge and ability to absorb other cultures and other situations in the world. After the North American Free Trade Agreement was passed, Jorge Castaneda, who later became the foreign minister of Mexico, wrote a book about it. He's a very smart guy and very pro-American. He said Americans never understood Mexican history, Mexican culture, and Mexican economics. If we don't understand Mexico, what do we know about Afghanistan? What do we know about Iraq? We're full of observations about what it's going to take, what's good for other people, how they'll absorb democracy, how we're going to teach people in the Middle East to buy and sell—people who have been buying and selling for thousands of years. But there's a limit to our resources, there's a limit to the will of our people, and there's a limit to our own capacity.

HOW THE HELL DID THIS HAPPEN?

How do we start weaning America's politics away from this imperial mindset? We need a counter-story of how America lives in the world that addresses the Septem-

ber 11 fears. We need to start the debate we never had after September 11, which was, “How the hell did this happen?”

It is impressive, the way the conservative propaganda machine shut down that conversation right after September 11. “We don’t want to talk about *why* this happened,” we were told by the talking heads from one end of the country to the other. All we had to know is that the people who did this were evil. If you take the word “evil” seriously, it has no historical context. It is just there. It has no past, it has no future, it’s just evil. This view precluded any kind of a serious discussion, and in fact those who did question it were accused of being unpatriotic and undermining the troops. The unresolved question of why September 11 happened is poisoning our body politic. We need to ask ourselves why that happened.

One theme of this book is the need for communicating better with average citizens. Robert McChesney, John Nichols, Amy Goodman, and Eric Alterman propose new media policy in part V. That policy must include an honest discussion about government.

One telling anecdote that illustrates this issue. During the television debates in the 2000 election between Gore and Bush, George Bush turned to the audience several times, pointed at Al Gore, and said something like, “This man thinks that the government can spend your money better than you can. I’m for giving *you* the money, putting it in your pocket.” What was instructive about this was not what Bush said, but what Gore *didn’t* say. Gore did not respond by framing what the public sector does but rather attempted to change the subject. Gore could have said, “So, Mr. Bush, do you want us to take back the money we spend on the military? Social Security? Medicare?” Or he could have said, “How many of you want to take an elevator to the thirty-fifth floor that hasn’t been inspected by the government? How many of you want to go to the supermarket and buy meat that hasn’t been inspected by the government?” But he said none of these things and let Bush take the upper hand on the issue.

Another lesson is from the health care debate in the 1990s. The conservatives accused the Clinton administration of involving the government in health care, and typically the Clinton spokesperson would deny this, pointing instead to the proposed special corporations that would be set up to administer the health plan. The spokesperson then proceed to describe a scheme that became unbelievably complicated and incredible in detail—all to hide the truth that the government would indeed have run the health care system. By trying to conceal the government’s role, they made the public suspicious. The public sensed their lack of conviction.

A NEW STORY ABOUT HOW AMERICA CAN LIVE IN THE WORLD

If we ever want to provide an alternative to the current policies on foreign and domestic issues, we must go back to showing how alternatives to present policy will

mean a better, more secure life for the average American. We must communicate how the recent tax cuts are redistributing income to the benefit of the rich. And we must communicate how that shift to the rich will limit the good life for the middle class. Most of all, we need to have a new story about how America can live in this world, how we can deal with the fear from September 11.

We have to start imagining the United States *not* responsible for the world. We have to start imagining the United States pulling back from this arrogant notion that we can make the world safe for democracy and free enterprise. A more inward-looking America would be a good thing for the world. There are some common-sense questions that we ought to start to ask. Why are we still in NATO, years after the end of the Cold War? We have some 80,000 troops in Germany. What are they doing there? Who is it that we are protecting Europe from? Already the productivity of five European countries is higher than that of the United States. Does Europe now, with an economic community that is going to be larger than the United States, need our protection? What are we doing with 40,000 troops in Korea? Don't China and Japan have an interest in keeping North Korea from invading South Korea? Why are we fighting a civil war in Colombia? Certainly not to keep drugs from coming here; some of the people we are helping are themselves in the illegal drug business.

This is not isolationism. We live in a big world. We are now in a common market with Canada and Mexico. The problem is we have no social contract. We have become responsible for doing something about the condition of our neighbor, Mexico, where 45 percent of the people live on less than \$2 a day. Why isn't the development of our own neighborhood our international project? Certainly what goes on in Mexico has a greater impact on the average American citizen than what goes on in many, many other places.

A less assertive America in the world would be a better citizen. We would pay our dues to the United Nations without demanding that all its agencies do exactly what we want them to do. We should join the international court and give it the authority that an international court needs to have.

There are lots of ways we can be in the world that do not involve chasing the imperial will-o'-the-wisp. For all of our establishment's bravado about being responsible for the world, the United States ranks twentieth among the major countries in terms of foreign aid.

Is a more inward America politically viable? It is said that people love war and that they love to wave the flag. Yet Richard Nixon won the election of 1968 promising to end the war in Vietnam, and Dwight Eisenhower won the election of 1952 promising to end the war in Korea. We shouldn't assume that war is always popular.

If the goal of America in the next twenty years is to change the world, the average American citizen has virtually no role to play except to pay taxes, support the troops, and shut up. You can join the army or maybe join the Peace Corps, which is a lot more dangerous today than it was ten years ago, but that's just about it.

We need to start building another conversation in this country. We need a national dialogue about what America ought to be twenty years from now, a conversation that includes what cities and neighborhoods ought to be like. And once you start asking what we should be like, you bring “we” back into the conversation in a healthy way.

Right now, most Americans think about the future in a very personal way. They don’t ask, “How can I change it?” They ask, “How can I survive it?” People want forecasts so that they can make the right investments, or so they can live in the right cities, or so they can make the right career choices. It’s all important, but we need to bring back a notion of the future as something that *we* can create.

During the 200th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, in 1976, there were a series of efforts around the United States to ask the question, “What will our town, what will our state, what will our city be like in the year 2000?” There were projects called California 2000, Atlanta 2000, and Chicago 2000. They had different names, but they got people together and asked this very, very important question about what they thought about the future.

Some of the activities were no more than Chamber of Commerce boosterism. Some of them were about land-use planning. Some got into questions of race, gender, poverty, access to services, and so on. The Carter administration funded some of this. It wasn’t very costly, and I think it’s time to revive the meetings. We don’t have to do it exactly the same way, but the spirit, the notion of having a national discussion of where this country ought to be would reveal the incompatibility between the direction this country is now headed in the world and what it is that Americans want.

Let’s do a thought experiment for a moment. Imagine Al Gore as president of the United States. Imagine hundreds of Americans dead in the period after the administration declared the war in Iraq over. Imagine two million jobs lost since Gore was elected president. Imagine a trillion-dollar surplus evaporating into a \$500 billion deficit. Imagine that he obviously misled the American people about the reasons for going to war. Imagine that his friends were getting huge war-profiteering contracts. Imagine that his CEO pals were guilty of ripping off pension funds, and he systematically refused to reform the financial markets.

Al Gore’s impeachment would be a daily topic of conversation. He would be ripped to shreds in America with this record. Against Clinton’s peccadillo—that in the end, the American people clearly didn’t care about—we are talking about first-class reasons here for an impeachment process. Yet Congress will not act.

Nor is Congress likely to act on a constitutional amendment that limits campaign contributions. But we need to continue to press the issue as a long-run strategy. Clearly, public financing is not working. What we need is a mindset that asserts our rights as citizens, our right to be in this debate, our right to take umbrage, and our right to be outrageous, just the way the ruling class does. Until we do that, it will be very, very hard for us to get a real alternative before the American people.

The time has come, I think, for a real opposition to empire. We don't need to do empire better, to get more allies better, to be smoother politically and diplomatically. We need a better idea than empire of how America ought to be in the world.

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