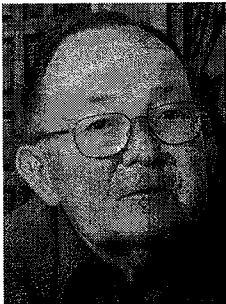

Chalmers Johnson Political Scientist, Author



Johnson worked as a consultant for the CIA from 1967 to 1973. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, he observed that the American military establishment sought new enemies to justify its existence. From that point on, he became a critic of American imperialism, writing three best-selling books on the subject. The far-flung network of military bases is costly to the US, causing financial stress to American taxpayers. Economic interest does not explain American imperialism, but there are still examples of an economic relationship. Japan and China have become the economic models for the rest of the world, based on their success using "industrial policy," state-directed investment in cutting-edge technology. America today is in danger of repeating the decline of the Roman Empire because the US has also created an executive branch which is unaccountable. It may be too late to bring it under control.

CIA Background: From Cold Warrior to Critic of Empire

I am a retired professor from the University of California, where I taught for well over 30 years, primarily in East Asian politics, the politics of China, Japan and the two Koreas.

I once worked as a consultant for the Office of National Estimates of the CIA from 1967 to 1973, at the invitation of the director of Central Intelligence, Richard Helms. I was brought in from the outside to review the intelligence reports the CIA produced, in order to check on myopic bureaucratism or generalized incompetence. It was interesting, but it also contributed to my view that United States did not have an intelligence service.

I came to believe that the CIA was the private army of the president, being used for highly dubious, almost invariably disastrous interventions in other people's countries. Starting with the overthrow of the Iranian government in 1953 for the sake of the British Petroleum company, we declared

that the elected Prime Minister of Iran, Mohammed Mosaddeq, was a communist. The Pope would have been a better candidate [for being considered a communist]. Mossadeq was just trying to regain some control over Iranian oil assets. The British wanted him out and talked Eisenhower into doing the dirty work.

When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, the *raison d'être* of the American imperial position had ended overnight. The American government instantaneously moved to find a replacement enemy: China, terrorism, drug lords, anything—even instability. The presumed threat could be anything to keep the military industrial complex working.

Starting around 1995, as I studied the 737 American military bases in other countries, I began to see the Cold War more as a cover for imperialism all along. In 1946 the British told President Truman they could no longer maintain their position in Greece. They asked us to assume that role in a seamless transfer of power among English-speaking imperialists.

This led me, in 2000, to publish *Blowback: The Costs and Consequences of American Empire*. “Blowback” is a special term of art, invented by the CIA in the after-action report on the overthrow of the Iranian government in 1953. It means retaliation for secret actions of our government. So, when the retaliation comes, Americans are unable to put it into context. They do not see cause and effect. Probably the most spectacular example of blowback we know is the Al Qaeda attacks of September 11, 2001.

This led to a book called *The Sorrows of Empire: Militarism, Secrecy and the End of the Republic* in 2004 and another one called *Nemesis: The Last Days of the American Republic*. Nemesis is the ancient Greek goddess of revenge, the punisher of a peculiarly Grecian sin, *hubris*, which is caused by arrogance and indifference to other people's needs. I concluded that *hubris* was very much associated with America after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. We said we won the Cold War. We did not win it. Both sides lost it; the Soviet Union just lost it first because they were always poorer.

As I begin to study American imperialism, the issue of its origins arose. There was American imperialism during the 19th century. One cannot help but see the Mexican-American War in that way. Full-blown American imperialism burst forth at the turn of the century [1898] in the war with Spain. We used this war to further bring Latin American countries under our hegemony and exploit them mercilessly. We sought to take advantage of them economically, but we denied it. Nothing was more convenient to the United States than Fidel Castro. A wonderful way to disguise our imperialism in Latin

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America was to say we were dealing with the threat of Soviet imperialism in the hemisphere.

Military Bases and the Dangers of a Standing Army

America has had hegemony over the rest of the world through an empire of military bases. Today, according to the Base Structure Report, an annual inventory report of real property owned by the Pentagon, we have 40 bases on foreign soil that are worth well over a billion and a half dollars in replacement value. It has nothing to do with American national defense; it has everything to do with the maintenance of American hegemony over the entire planet.

Until WWII, we certainly had a history of imperialism. But we did not have a huge munitions industry. There had been standing armies, but citizens were still called on to defend the country, and soldiers were demobilized as soon as the emergency was over.

Perhaps the greatest single warning we have ever had was in the first presidential Farewell Address by George Washington. He warned the country about the danger of standing armies. This is incidentally the exact same thing that destroyed the Roman army. The old Roman legions, composed of farmers in times of national emergency, gave way to long-service armies of 20 years' duty.

Foreign imperialism does not mix well with domestic democracy. You cannot have them both. You can be a domestic democracy and your empire will fall apart. If you want to keep your empire, you are going to lose your domestic democracy and turn into a tyranny.

Ambiguity of Economic Explanation of Empire

Reducing American imperialism to economic interests and corporate interests has the smell of ersatz or vulgar Marxism about it, but in the minds of many people it offers an easy, satisfactory explanation, which is corporate greed. I dislike this view because it denigrates what imperialism actually is: the impulse to maintain hegemony over other nations. Economic power is only one form of domination. We have used American military power to serve the parochial interests of American businesses and investors and to strengthen the American balance of payments. But, as a superpower, America is losing its manufacturing base rapidly and is the world's largest net debtor nation.

There are serious anomalies in an economic explanation of imperialism, though the US government has used its imperial apparatus for eco-

conomic purposes, for the advantage of American firms. An example is the overthrow of the government of Guatemala in 1954 because the United Fruit Company objected to some moderate proposals for land reform. Later, International Telephone and Telegraph participated in the coup against Salvador Allende, president of Chile. More generally, American power has been used in Latin America to protect the owners of extractive industries.

East Asia: Success of Industrial Policy

After World War II, the Japanese developed industrial policy, which means economic goal setting by government. It is a form of socialism, but it is different from the European or Soviet variety of socialism, which involved state ownership of property as well as state goal setting. Reformed market socialism, in China under Deng Xiao Ping or in East Europe before the Wall came down, lowered a lot of decision making to the household unit, but it still maintained social ownership of property, which stood in the way of entrepreneurship.

The Japanese have simply reversed the usual Western category of socialism. Instead of reformed communism, with state ownership of property and private management of economy, the Japanese combined social goal setting and communal management with private ownership of property. The government supports enterprises in every possible way with inexpensive capital and guarantees against foreign competition. Industrial policy enabled Japan to succeed. It enabled them to sell us automobiles and consumer electronics. The latter killed the consumer electronics business in America.

We now have a more interesting competitor, and that is China. They have learned the Japanese lesson. They sometimes say the antidote, the singular source of data, is my book on the history of Japanese industrial policy, *MITI and the Japanese Miracle*. MITI refers to the Ministry of International Trade and Industry. It was the Ministry of Munitions during WWII. It is the command post inside the world of Japanese socialism where the Japanese squared the circle on how to produce socialism without the known consequences of socialism. They developed general goal setting, but without the inefficiencies, the waste, and the travesties that are associated with a true command economy.

East Asia as New Model for Developing Countries

Generally speaking, East Asia has become a model for the rest of the world. You will find that throughout Latin America, notably in Brazil, there is

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an increasing contempt for American neoliberalism, for the preaching of free market virtues. It is more or less a taboo subject in the United States to point out that we are no longer a model for the world.

Europe is important and powerful, but Europe is aging. It does not have the huge manpower resources of East Asia.

The center of gravity is moving to China. By around 2025 China will be the world's most powerful country. The United States, if it still exists, may be the second; the third will probably be India. Then we would look at the European Union, instead of independent countries like Britain, France or Germany.

Economic Fragility of American Empire*

There is something intrinsically unstable about the American empire. Military Keynesianism, the devotion of masses of resources to the military, has unintended consequences. We are now spending close to a trillion dollars a year on our military establishment. That does not include money spent on nuclear weapons by the Department of Energy or on veterans' affairs, including treating our wounded from Iraq. It does not include foreign military aid by the State Department. It does not include the actual defense of the country by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). After 9/11, we discovered that DHS has nothing to do with the defense of our country. It is busy with warfare in outer space or other useless ways to spend money.

The American Empire could come to an end very quickly if just one little thing happened: if Saudi Arabia required payment for its oil in euros instead of dollars. If the Saudis simply did that, the American stock exchange would collapse, the backing for the dollar would end. As the country with the world's largest annual trade deficit, we would be in the same fix as Germany in 1923, China in 1948, Argentina in 2001 and 2002. We are facing the possibility of national bankruptcy.

We are now on the threshold of what happened to the Soviet Union. They either had to reform or collapse, as they did in 1991. Our own collapse

* Ed.: In a part of the interview excised due to length, Johnson compares the American empire with the Roman Empire. Having an empire endangers democracy in the US, just as it destroyed the Roman republic. When Rome shifted from a citizen army to a professional army, it accepted militarism as the core principle of Roman society and made fighting a permanent way of life. Eventually, one general, Julius Caesar seized the opportunity to gain control and became dictator. Americans are naïve to think that democracy cannot give way to tyranny in our country.

is getting closer, but we are supremely unconscious in the face of the pressures on us today.

The Imperial Presidency

One of the serious problems in our society today and a symptom of how far gone we are is the "imperial presidency." It is as contrary to American constitutional theory and practice as one could imagine. Political leadership lies in the ability to compromise among three separate and coequal branches of government. As numerous Supreme Court Justices have said over the years, this was never intended to make for a more efficient government. It was intended as a bulwark against tyranny.

The Constitution guarantees in Article 1 that citizens of the United States will receive ultimately an accurate account of how tax dollars are spent. Americans do not yet get an accurate statement of how their tax dollars are spent. The budgets of the 16 federal intelligence agencies, particularly and notably the CIA, have been secret since the day they were created. That has turned these agencies into a private army of the president.

In the case of the Department of the Defense, 40% of the monstrous defense budget is "black," secret; it can only be seen by uniformed military officers and a couple of deeply hamstrung members of Congress.

The presidency is out of control. There is no effective oversight of it. The CIA had no oversight of any sort until the mid 1970s when the Church Committee was appointed because of the misuse of the CIA by Nixon in Watergate. They created the original Congressional Oversight Committee. These have been farcical. They do nothing. When Congressman Charlie Wilson of Texas became the Chairman of the House Oversight Committee, he rather famously called his friends at the CIA and said, "The fox is in the hen house. You can do anything you want to."

The current President's Intelligence Oversight Board is a check on misuse and illegal activities in the intelligence agencies that have worked their way through the past five presidencies. It was created by Jerry Ford. It has not actually met, done anything, requested information or anything for the first five and a half years of the George Bush administration. It has simply made itself notorious now for having defied a presidential order. The Presidential Intelligence Oversight Board was made permanent by Ronald Reagan in 1981. These are the types of things that are out of control.

The George W. Bush presidency has misused the power to issue so-called "signing statements." In signing a law, he adds to it a statement of his

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own that he does not agree with a provision or section and that he is not going to enforce it. Since the President does not have the authority to issue line-item vetoes, this is clearly an unconstitutional assertion of executive authority, but it has not been challenged. It is hard to explain why Congress has so abdicated its role, why it has been so easily bought off and paid for, compromised.

Citizens are Kept in the Dark about Empire

You cannot get information about what our government does. The press has failed you as thoroughly as any institution could have. If you are an extremely adept user of the internet you could become better informed than someone who reads the low-brow daily newspapers of America. It is very hard to even begin to find out what is really going on. So we need a renaissance of public information, public awareness, and public attempts to hold their representatives responsible.

There seems to be a sense of powerlessness in this society today. I think the public is scared to death. They actually know we are in terrible trouble, we are heading towards a cliff, and they do not know what to do about it. Can we recreate the very structure that guaranteed our liberty at this point? We still take for granted that the police will treat us as citizens, that our rights will be observed, that we enjoy the rights of citizenship rather than simply being subjects. I am quite cynical on this subject of whether or not there is enough time left to make the changes that would be necessary.
