

Risking our Security, or Securing our Risk?: Neoimperialists Play with a Stacked Deck

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Saying that to keep this Greek name, democracy, is an affair of context... is not necessarily giving in to the opportunism or cynicism of the antidemocrat who is not showing his cards. Completely the contrary: one keeps this indefinite right to the question, to criticism, to deconstruction (guaranteed rights, in principle, in any democracy: no deconstruction without democracy, no democracy without deconstruction).

Jacques Derrida¹

For those suspicious of the custodians of the ‘War on Terror’, there is at least one question that presses itself to the fore: what is ‘new’ about the somewhat innocuous, but increasingly bold, quasi-doctrine of neoimperialism? Conventional political wisdom has distinguished neoimperialism from the ‘old’ imperialism by inserting the adjective ‘economic’ and/or ‘military’, thus softening the term politically and, at least ostensibly, immunizing it from democratic critique. Neoimperialism, on this account, is not a crusade of domination in the service of cultural or racial hegemony, but a conscientious, well-oiled, strategic machine of global, political and capital security. However, cloaked in the rhetoric of the Truth of free-market democracy, the United States’ global-evangelical message has been progressively determined by policymakers who count among their heroes and mentors not Adam Smith or Thomas Jefferson, but the meticulous administrators and bureaucrats of the former British Empire. What was before conducted within the euphemistic idiom of ‘humanitarian nation-building’, has increasingly (post September 11) been infused with a grander, suprahistorical, moral validation. Echoing the expansionist tendencies of the former British empire, who viewed the ‘uncivilized’ world as putative child-like wards of patrifocal Europe, President George W. Bush has promised to hunt down, root out, defeat, and reform the barbarians of the twenty-first century: political terrorists of all stripes. For

the ravaged countries in which Bush's hunting, rooting out, and defeating takes place, the United States paternalistically offers its economic and political sponsorship as a salve. Such is the conservative compassion, tough love, of the neoimperialists.

Like the British Empire before it—which traipsed across Africa, India, Australia, and the Middle East under the banner of 'commerce, Christianity, and civilization'—United States' foreign policy has refigured its position as a global power along the lines of a generous but strict benefactor. Yet, hastening to arrest the backward effects of its own propped-up regimes in the 'underdeveloped' world, the United States has also made a subtler, slicker, political move. In a barely detectable ideological shift, United States foreign policymakers have melded economic and political vocabularies so seamlessly as to have ostensibly revalorized a 'new' idea of imperialism. The 'old' imperialist relationship of forcible control, by which one country negates or neutralizes the sovereignty of another through direct annexation or subjugation, is softened and mitigated in neoimperialism by more indirect military, economic, and bureaucratic 'influence'. In the parlance of President George W. Bush, a risk to the United States (or any of its various economic or political interests) is a risk to all. Averting such risk is not a matter of outright imperial suppression, it is said, but of a more speculative sense of security. Neoimperialist security depends, fundamentally, upon an acute foresight about political or economic risk; it is *preemptive*, a kind of hedging one's bets. 'Old' imperialism eliminates risk; neoimperialism *manages* it.

Given the most sympathetic reading, then, neoimperialism falls somewhere between mere leadership and outright Empire. It thus constitutes a new mode of discourse peculiar to a new political-economic *hegemon*: namely, the twenty-first century United States. As I will demonstrate in what follows, some have accused this new hegemony and its attendant risk-management discourse as simply evidencing a lack of imperial resolve on the part of self-consciously democratic American policymakers. For such critics, the United States will not fully commit to Empire because it fears the sacrifices that imperialism proper demands, the most devastating of which is risking the moral high ground in international politics. On this account, neoimperialism hesitates, and ultimately fails, in those moments where it refuses to take the risks of greatness: that is—the risks of Empire. However, such a critique is too one-dimensional, and leaves no room for an anti-neo-imperialist position that is *also* anti-imperialist. Reducing the erroneous logic of neoimperialism to a mere shortsightedness about policy decisions misses the real internal paradox of America's new foreign policy. Specifically, U.S. advocates of neoimperialism find themselves caught in a double-bind: too committed to democracy to run the risks of Empire, yet too enticed by Empire to run the risks of democracy. Hence, I will argue that inasmuch as we are willing to grant that the discourse of neoimperialist risk management truncates or neutralizes the drive for Empire, we must also consider the way in which it similarly curtails the democratic imperative to remain open to risk.

In "The Empire Slinks Back" for the *New York Times Magazine*, Niall Ferguson, an outspoken proponent of American neoimperialism and the author of *Empire: The Rise and Demise of the British World Order and the Lessons of Global Power*, laments

the fact that Americans “don’t have what it takes to rule the world.” At the outset, it is important to note that Ferguson had been writing, as early as 1991, in support of the then unpopular policy of American imperialism. Ferguson lays out a point-by-point contrast of contemporary America with earlier British imperialism, and finds America woefully lacking. Ferguson writes:

Capitalism and democracy are not naturally occurring, but require strong institutional foundations of law and order. The proper role of an imperial America is to establish these institutions where they are lacking, if necessary... by military force.²

Thirteen years later, Ferguson has gained more public company in this opinion.³ Despite a general reluctance to explicitly adopt the language of imperialism, Ferguson argues that the United States is nevertheless conducting itself with an aim toward a form of enlightened foreign administration reminiscent of the British imperialists. Furthermore, Ferguson contends, emulating the British Empire is a noble enterprise for the United States. In a bit of revisionist history, Ferguson writes:

The British Empire has had a pretty lousy press from a generation of “postcolonial” historians anachronistically affronted by its racism. But the reality is that the British were significantly more successful at establishing market economies, the rule of law and the transition to representative governments than the majority of postcolonial governments have been. The policy “mix” favored by Victorian imperialists reads like something just published by the International Monetary Fund, if not the World Bank: free trade, balanced budgets, sound money, the common law, incorrupt administration and investment in infrastructure financed by international loans. These are precisely the things that Iraq needs right now. If the scary-sounding “American Empire” can deliver them, then I am all for it.⁴

That is, American aversion to properly adopting the language of imperialism is the fault of the cultural and academic Left, which has equated imperialist strategy with racist politics to the exclusion of the ‘good’ or more benevolent strains of imperialism. The United States is far better equipped to build an Empire—in economic resources, military might, and consumer power—than Great Britain ever was. What Americans lack, to paraphrase Ferguson, is the confidence of the imperialist conscience. Too concerned with their global image as a superpower, American economic and political might is neutralized by second-guessing itself too often, and too soon.

Recalling the now famous, though brief, image of the Stars and Stripes draped over the noosed head of Saddam Hussein’s statue, Ferguson speculates that the U.S. flag could not have been up there for more than a minute before some commanding officer, plagued with a bad conscience, protested: “Son, get that thing down here on the double, or we’ll have every TV station from here to Bangladesh denouncing us as Yankee imperialists!”⁵ Like a jockey reigning in a thoroughbred, military administrators and foreign policy-

makers train, equip and indoctrinate U.S. military forces, Ferguson speculates, only to draw them back when the inevitable imperial impulse shows itself in them. President Bush, in an address to the Iraqi people shortly after the ‘fall’ of Baghdad, promised that “the government of Iraq and the future of your country will soon belong to you... We will help you build a peaceful and representative government that protects the rights of all citizens. *And then our military forces will leave.*”⁶ But Ferguson argues that despite the unparalleled force displayed by superior U.S. military might and its unquestionable staying power, when it comes down to the ugly work of ‘occupying’ a country, the U.S. is only too eager to leave. Like many others, Ferguson finds the most mysterious aspect of the U.S. presence in Iraq not to be its mission or its strategy, but the *duration* of its stay. The discrepancy in official predictions of the length of U.S. military presence—first days, then weeks, then months—is not accidental, nor the result of a mixed message or bad communication, but genuine hesitancy.

In a prewar speech to the American Enterprise Institute, Bush declared: “We will remain in Iraq as long as necessary and not a day more.” It is striking that the unit of measure he used was days. If—as more and more commentators claim—America has embarked upon a new age of empire, it may turn out to be the most evanescent empire in all history. Other empire builders have fantasized about ruling subject people a thousand years. This is shaping up to be history’s first thousand-day empire. Make that a thousand hours.⁷

The claim here is that although unable to admit it, the U.S. effectively adopts an imperialist ideology after September 11 when it took upon itself the project of eliminating the risk of terrorist opposition, not only in the United States, but in the *world*. Going to war, first in Afghanistan and later in Iraq, was essentially a strategy of delimiting all risk posed to U.S. security.⁸ Yet as Ferguson points out, wars, like empires, are not measured in days.

The lack of imperial resolve on the part of the United States is the crux of Ferguson’s (and, increasingly, the more extreme conservative element of the present U.S. administration’s) complaint against American foreign policy. Unlike the British Imperialists who Ferguson claims had no need for an ‘exit strategy’, Americans are unwilling to *export* a significant sector of their own population to buttress and complete the work of their military operations. Ferguson contends that the educated, elite, ruling class that British imperialists installed in its colonies were bred with a spirit of adventure and the grit to follow through with it, no matter into what dark corners of the world the British Empire discharged them. Following closely on the heels of the conquering army, Great Britain was equipped with a battery of citizens ready and willing to leave behind the comforts of home for civil service in imperially annexed countries.

They provided the indispensable ‘men on the spot’ who learned the local languages, perhaps, adopted some local customs—though not usually to the fatal extent of ‘going native’—and acted as the intermediaries between a remote imperial authority and the

indigenous elites upon whose willing collaboration the empire depended.⁹

The U.S, on the other hand, is unwilling to send in anyone on the heels of their own army, save a detachment of humanitarian NGOs, economists, or recently-graduated ‘Ivy-League nation-builders’ who believe that “you can set up an independent central bank, reform the tax code, liberalize prices and privatize all the major utilities — and be home in time for the first reunion.”¹⁰ What America lacks, Ferguson bemoans, is a ready-to-go ruling elite. Civil service in the ‘*putative imperia*’ — *especially* civil service in regions like Afghanistan, Iraq, or what Ferguson calls “the most dysfunctional of Central Africa’s wretched republics”¹¹ — is simply not on the professional radar for consideration by the United States’ brightest and most well-bred. Having just exited universities that refuse to educate America’s elite about their role in the ‘scary-sounding American Empire’, the cream of the U.S. crop are instead, much to Ferguson’s consternation, only willing to travel abroad to ‘mini-Me’ versions of America.¹² Paranoid of being labeled Yankee imperialists, softened by a cushy consumerist standard of living, hoodwinked by leftist historical critiques of imperial racism and colonial exploitation, the American educated elite that would fulfill the United States’ destiny as a world superpower “won’t actually *go there*.”¹³ Neoimperialism is no good, for critics like Ferguson, because it remains unwilling to step up to the ‘old’ imperial plate, so to speak, and actualize a divine moral right that President Bush said all nations should recognize: “this call of history has come to the right country... The liberty we prize is not America’s gift to the world, it is God’s gift to humanity.”¹⁴

As it turns out, declaring a War on Terrorism may be as ill-fated and nebulous a project as the War on Drugs. Without a clearly defined enemy to defeat, without at least the possibility of a clear victory to be declared, the War on Terror *structurally* could expand indefinitely (this was no doubt foreshadowed in part by the original military operations title, quickly abandoned, of the mission in Afghanistan: ‘Infinite Justice’). Jürgen Habermas, in an October 2001 acceptance speech for a German Peace Prize, summed up the estimation of many, left *and* right, intellectuals when he stated, concisely, “the ‘war against terrorism’ is no war.”¹⁵ In January of 2002, when President Bush delivered his first State of the Union Address following the events of September 11, he stated that the enemies of the United States “view the entire world as a battlefield, and we must pursue them wherever they are... So long as training camps operate, so long as nations harbor terrorists, freedom is at risk and America and our allies must not, and will not, allow it.”¹⁶ One year later, promising again to eliminate “every danger and every enemy that threatens the American people,” Bush warned his constituents and critics against complacency:

There are days when our fellow citizens do not hear news about the war on terror. There’s never a day when I do not learn of another threat, or receive reports of operations in progress, or give an order in this global war against a scattered network of killers. The war goes on, and we are winning... some governments will be timid in the face of terror. And make no mistake about it: If they do not act, America will... States like [Iran, North Korea, Iraq], and their terrorist allies, constitute an

axis of evil, arming to threaten the peace of the world. By seeking weapons of mass destruction, these regimes pose a grave and growing danger.¹⁷

The (ir)real target of the War on Terror, then, is a ubiquitous “grave and growing danger.” Victory in such a war can be no less than absolute security, not only the elimination of “clear and present danger” but also *possible* danger, by way of a preemptive neutralization of the “axis of evil.” President Bush reiterated this absolutist claim to American security again in the 2003 State of the Union Address:

Some have said we must not act until the threat is imminent. Since when have terrorists and tyrants announced their intentions, politely putting us on notice before they strike? If this threat is permitted to fully and suddenly emerge, all actions, all words, and all recriminations would come too late.¹⁸

In order to *succeed* in the complete elimination of foreseen and unforeseen terrorist risk, it becomes necessary that the United States’ force be deployed toward *complete* subjugation of any threatening countries. The dreaded specter of a ‘quagmire’, reified in memories of Vietnam and Somalia (among many, many others), is too fresh in the collective unconscious of policymakers. The United States, in the interest of security, cannot afford to be ‘too late’. In the global-political game, the only acceptable option for the United States is total victory: that is—total security by way of a total defeat of any threatening force.

However, the United States cannot afford to compromise the moral force of its humanitarian and democratic rhetoric, either. Because Americans are ideologically resistant to being seen as ‘Yankee imperialists’, unreflectively preferring instead the softer neologic of economic/military/democratic neoimperialism, they are caught in a double bind. On the one hand, the U.S. must avert all extant and potential risk for its own security, to fulfill its promise to America’s constituents and allies that they are secure. On the other hand, the U.S. cannot seem to overcome its own aversion to the moral risk of becoming a new Empire, its allergy to protracted totalitarianism. Consequently, U.S. force and influence as a superpower is, in Ferguson’s curt formulation, *ephemeral*, and its War on Terror, *a la* Habermas, is nothing (the mirroring symmetry of the right and the left critique of the War on Terror are here most explicit.) Metaphorically represented by the Iraq War’s first few days of ‘shock and awe’, Ferguson argues that U.S. power can be very, very hard—that is, *when* it flexes its superpower muscle. Against those who would blame the post-war confusion on a softening of U.S. power, Ferguson retorts “it is not so much Power Lite as Flash Power—here today, with a spectacular bang, but gone tomorrow.”¹⁹ If what the United States desires and promises is the elimination of all risk—U.S. risk being coterminous with the ubiquitous ‘terrorist’ threat—then the War on Terror is, even if unintended, an absolutist strategy, an Imperial War. So, why the resistance to imperialism? Why not call a spade a spade?

Thankfully, several intellectuals have also seen President Bush’s reductionist rhetoric

for what it is. Contrary to Ferguson, who would hurriedly and forcefully push Bush over the precipice of indecision and into an outright imperialism, more critical voices have called for more critical thinking. Edward Said, just days after the September 11 attacks, warned that “Islam and the West are inadequate banners,” which depend on the sort of underlying Manichean distinctions that shore up absolutist imperial sentiment:

Inevitably, then, collective passions are being funneled into a drive for war that uncannily resembles Captain Ahab in pursuit of Moby Dick, rather than what is going on, an imperial power injured at home for the first time, pursuing its interests systematically in what has become a suddenly reconfigured geography of conflict, without clear borders, or visible actors. Manichean symbols and apocalyptic scenarios are bandied about with future consequences and rhetorical restraint thrown to the winds.²⁰

Echoing Said’s sentiments, Arundhati Roy perhaps most clearly drew the link between old and new imperialism with regard to the War on Terror when she speculated, “what we’re witnessing here is the spectacle of the world’s most powerful country reaching reflexively, angrily, for an old instinct to fight a new kind of war.”²¹ Two ‘wars’ later, if we count only military and not diplomatic wars, Said and Roy’s prescience is confirmed. The United States foreign policy is, increasingly, what the French philosopher Lyotard would call a new move in an old game.²² President Bush’s State of the Union Addresses since September 11, 2001, have echoed the same reductionist logic, the same nationalist exemplarity, the same manifest destiny, and the same imperial impulse that motivated Great Britain at the height of its Empire. The War on Terror and its emergent neoimperialist doctrine have as their taproot a certain strain of conservative American messianism that the Bush administration has not only utilized, but also epitomized. No longer under the banner of ‘The West’, but exclusively under the banner of itself, the United States has insisted on a go-it-alone strategy for achieving American political and economic security. The Bush administration has established a track record of neutralizing and, consequently, securing any risk that presents itself by unilaterally *not risking* U.S. security at all—either by withholding America’s immense financial support (Cuba) or political support (Kyoto), or by simply walking away altogether when a dialogue would mean a compromise (Durban). And Bush’s official rhetoric has, simultaneously, accomplished this while figuring the United States as a precarious, trembling target of world-historical import.

What the United States needs, *pace* Ferguson, is not to expunge American imperialism of its perfunctory ‘neo’, but to come to grips with the philosophical and psychological grounds that make the ‘neo’ seem obligatory in the first place. One avenue for exploration on this front is provided by understanding the political power of naming and the problems with a strategy of absolute risk aversion, both of which suggest much about the perils of eliminating the democratic voice of critique, the risks of a false security.

Let us lay out clearly the new move in an old game, the problem of the ‘old’ imperialism that haunts neoimperialism, a game of security and risk that I would suggest

is a game played with a stacked deck (tragically, a game that risks nothing and, hence, not a game at all). First, when neoimperialists attempt to assuage the severity of classic imperial domination by *renaming* themselves and claiming, in effect, that economic or military ‘influence’ is not the same as direct subjugation and annexation, they are playing a smart game. As Ferguson notes, ‘old’ imperialism has gotten a bad rap from contemporary cultural and political theorists for its racist and hegemonic impositions, and neoimperialists adeptly side-step this criticism by abandoning the harshest of imperialist rhetoric. When the U.S. administration insists, again and again, that the War on Terror is not a War on Islam, or a War on Arabs, it effectively washes its hands of the damage that such xenophobic rhetoric instigates (is it the case that the neoimperialist interests in ‘civilizing’ or ‘democratizing’ the underdeveloped world *really* are not motivated, even in part, by a kind of racial or cultural superiority? Or, as is more likely, is it the case that neoimperialists have learned the benefit of appropriating the moral advantage of their critics under the rubric of ‘humanitarian intervention’, effectively neutralizing the charge of racial or cultural prejudice and disengaging the political leverage of anti-imperialists?) Neoimperialists adopt the classic power position of imperialism—the King—that is, the position with the right to bestow *names*.²³ In an address entitled “What’s In A Name?,” Eqbal Ahmed recounts a complex genealogy of names that preceded in our present referent ‘Third World’, a genealogy that cannot help but remind one of President Bush’s designation of an ‘axis of evil’. In the immediate post-Cold War period, Ahmed writes:

This new reality demanded new nomenclature. It was not good politics any more to describe Africa as the Dark Continent, or Asia as an undifferentiated Orient. But old outlook dies hard. So English and American scholars came up with the term Backward Nations... Backward nations were soon replaced with non-western nations but this did not fly as Latin Americans laid claim to be Western and did not want to be thrown in with Asians and Africans. Thence came ‘under-developed countries’, a term that responded to the United States recently articulated policy of promoting development... Underdeveloped was in currency for a while. But it too was found lacking proper PR content. Thereupon a number of American and British academics attempted to link empirical realities to diplomatic convenience. They offered various appellation—New Nations, Emerging Nations, Transitional Societies and, from a famous Latinist, Expectant Nations.²⁴

No matter which term is in fashion, Ahmed argues, “who gives names to whom is a question of power.”²⁵ Giving the U.S. threat the ambiguous—*and to this day undefined*—name of ‘terrorism’ was one way of reinforcing the unchecked power that the U.S. needed to conduct its war; but giving itself the name ‘neoimperialist’ (should it uniformly decide to do so) would be a way of reinforcing its imperial power by another, more palatable, appellation. That is to say, ‘neoimperialism’, despite its claims to humanitarian interests and democratic freedom, has also defined the players of the global political game in such a way that it always, already wins. Whereas the ‘old’ imperialism reigned victorious

through outright oppression and suppression, the ‘new’ imperialism claims victory while leaving behind the messiest and murkiest state of affairs. American neoimperialism casts an equally oppressive shadow, but tempers it with the rhetoric of global redress, which is ‘spun’ as political, economic, and cultural *liberation*. The role of the British Empire was to secure its populace by securing in advance the result of all its endeavors, regardless of what the newly vanquished may have called their conquerors. On the contrary, when the United States names its occupying forces ‘liberators’—and not, like the old English imperialists, ‘lords’—it wins both ways.

Second, American neoimperialism, unlike ‘old’ imperialism, never risks itself entirely. One of the neoimperialist advantages of subordinating Western political vocabulary to Western economic vocabulary—that is, subordinating democracy to corporate capitalism—is that ‘risk’ becomes an unambiguously negative term. In any economy, the advantage belongs to the position carrying the least amount of risk (Late capitalism would be the apotheosis of this principle, as it is driven largely by not only eliminating present risk, but also speculative risk). If long-term occupation or annexation of an enemy country is too much of a political, economic, or humanitarian menace—as it, inevitably, always is—then neoimperialists spread out and *secure* their risk by promising to do only as much as they know, in advance, they can accomplish. ‘Flash Power’, as Ferguson called it, or ‘shock and awe’, is meant to present the threat of utter destruction or domination and hope to inspire subjugation, without having to go through the messy work of insuring it (for example, George W. Bush’s promises to depose Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden were not, properly speaking, ‘risky’; the United States undoubtedly possessed the military might to secure those promises in advance. His promise to deliver ‘freedom’ to the people of Iraq, on the other hand, may prove to be more so). Warning of the double logic of what he calls ‘wars of altruism’, David Reiff writes:

... if we are going to intervene, let us understand the project that we must engage in, which is not just humanitarian intervention, nor even nation-building, but the de facto recolonization of some of the most unfortunate parts of the world. To do this, we must acquire all the trappings of an imperial bureaucracy, by whatever name we choose to conceal it, and not imagine that our armed forces, no matter how powerful they are, can do the job alone.²⁶

Reiff’s complaint, like Ferguson’s, is that Americans are unwilling to risk *whatever it takes* to build a lasting Empire. On that score, they are probably right. But Ferguson wants an *old* imperialism, and the fact that one of neoimperialism’s driving motors is risk *aversion* seems lost on him. Neoimperialists want wars in which there is no clear enemy to defeat them, not Crusades in which land is clearly gained or lost; neoimperialists want to ‘manage’ and ‘influence’ the nations that they help to ‘build’ in order to *lessen* the risk of their investments, not take on the added risks of providing long-term security to an expanded constituency. Neoimperialists want, simultaneously, the power of imperialists and the populism of democrats. That is, neoimperialists only sit down at the table where the

cards are marked, where the outcome is determined or significantly delimited, where the opposition is no 'real' opposition, and where an ace up the sleeve can always be hidden.

It is at this point that the link between the power of naming and the centrality of risk aversion begins to threaten the integrity of any American neoimperialist position. On the one hand, a critique of neoimperialism is not significantly different than a critique of imperialism, inasmuch as one is willing to accept that the 'neo' is a device intended more for diversion than clarification. But perhaps there is an advantage to granting *some* kind of substantive difference, a difference that makes a difference, to the 'neo'. Perhaps there is some philosophical or political *reason* why the United States, in particular, is afraid of being called 'Yankee imperialists'. I would contend that a real critique can be grounded in considering that, equal to the specter of *imperialism*, what haunts and disturbs American neoimperialism is the specter of *democracy*. Where right-wing critique (like Ferguson) and more leftist critique (like those of Habermas, Said, and Roy) are strangely in agreement is this: neoimperialism effects a stalemate. Attempting to be *both* captor and liberator, militant and humanitarian, enemy and friend, victor and victim, neoimperialism commits *neither* to the all-or-nothing project of empire-building *nor* to the in-the-trenches untidiness of responsible interventionism. Caught between a vision of historical greatness and the attitude of an underdog, Americans cannot decide whether it is a greater risk to remain the 'former colony' or to become the 'new colonizer'. Yet, at heart, it seems Americans are most afraid of being called 'Yankee imperialists' because they know that the idea of a democratic Empire *just doesn't make sense*.²⁷

There is something *unheimlich*, something falsely secure, about the United States assuming the name 'neoimperialist'. It is a way of hedging a bet, of not-making-a-decision, of designating oneself out of fear for what one may be designated by the other, and of abstaining from real responsibility. It may be risky in its own right to suggest that it is possible that the reason Americans cannot summon up the confidence of an imperial conscience is because they are too disturbed by the call of their own *democratic* conscience—but, then again, it may allow some critical leverage for an anti-neo-imperialism. Modern liberal democracies were inaugurated in violent opposition to the *ancien regime*, as concrete political bodies created and sustained by the fundamental practice of *critique*. Political criticism is always a risk to the integrity of a body politic, but it is a risk that is meant to insure that no political body becomes so secure as to put all others at risk. Political critique is a form of dissent structurally built into democracies, which keeps any particular democracy from comporting itself as a world-historical model that could subsequently stamp itself onto the raw material of the world. A democracy, unlike an empire, *must* be structurally revisable, substantially improvable and, most importantly, infinitely responsible to those who call it into question. It is not held in place by a stable center of gravity, like the Crown, or a divine appointment, like the Pope, but spreads itself out over a mass of differentiated and often antagonistic forces. The genuine security of a democracy is located in the degree to which it is willing to *risk* itself for the good of its constituents, not in the lengths it will go to circumvent risk. In his 1994 *Politics of Friendship*, Jacques Derrida writes,

For democracy remains to come; this is its essence in so far as it remains: not only will it remain infinitely perfectible, hence always insufficient and future, but, belonging to the time of the promise, it will always remain, in each of its future times, to come: even when there is democracy, it never exists, it is never present, it remains the theme of a non-presentable concept.²⁸

That is to say, democracy haunts itself, in a way, by never being fully present to itself, by always driving itself forward to be more and to do more in order to realize itself. Consequently, the reason that Americans are afraid of being called ‘Yankee imperialists’, the motivation behind the strange psychological impulse to place the ‘neo’ in front of their more suspect imperialistic transactions, is because the American superpower is uncannily ‘spooked’ by its own democratic ghost.

This specter, historically, lies both behind and in front of the United States. It is in the distant past of the British Empire’s former North American ‘colonies’, as well as the more recent history of these ‘new’ United States’ ‘neo’-imperial failures in Somalia, the Balkans, and Afghanistan. More hauntingly, it is in the future of Iraq, possibly Iran and North Korea, possibly Israel and Palestine. The specter of a ‘true’ democracy disturbs any fundamental strategy of risk aversion and insists that ‘our’ security is not only *not present* in such a strategy, but that it will *never* be present. Those who would break the stalemate of neoimperialism by boldly taking on the risks of an Empire do so because, in principle, the risks to an Empire can be eliminated, subjugated, or appropriated. The renewal of a commitment to democracy would break this stalemate as well, though it would do so by giving up altogether on the idea of a stable security that can be ‘had’, by force or otherwise. As Derrida reminds us, the ‘guaranteed rights’ in any democracy include the “right to question, to criticize, to deconstruction.”²⁹ This effectively means that democracy must, in principle, secure for its citizens the right to put it at risk, to call it to account, to sometimes destabilize it, and to render all of its endeavors incalculable. One particularly indicative example of the neoimperialist attempt to abrogate these rights, and consequently avert the fundamental risks of democratic critique, can be found in the infamous ‘misinformation’ provided by President Bush regarding the Iraqis’ possession of weapons of mass destruction (WMD’s) and their status as an imminent threat to U.S. security. While there are doubtlessly numerous reasons one could offer for this pretext, it is certainly the case that the misinformation resulted in a tempering of vocal opposition to the War against Iraq, if not a shoring up of sentiment and support among the U.S. citizenry. The inevitable instability and risk posed by an internal critique was partially deferred in the name of a hyperbolized sense of national security. As a temporary result, the neoimperialists could focus American attention on the enemies abroad. However, as cracks in the management of this growing anti-war sentiment widen, every attempt on the administration’s part to secure popular support can be seen as a transparent attempt to close down the possibility of making public what will be very risky questions. In short, the neoimperialist strategy of risk management impacts democracy at the most

fundamental level, by viewing critique itself as the primary risk to be managed, thus potentially figuring its own citizens on the same order as the enemy.

When Derrida suggests that democracy as such is always ‘to come’ (*a venir*), when he insists that democracy belongs to the structure of a promise and to a future time, he is arguing that the idea of a democracy is not a part of a ‘closed’ economy. Democracy takes risks, it puts itself at risk, and it can never be sure of the variant ways in which those risks can be calculated. Undertaking the project of a democracy is, on Derrida’s account, an abrogation of any suprahistorical or metaphysical logic of calculation. That is, the moment that all of democracy’s risks are secured, the moment it can rest in the confidence that all of its bets are covered, the moment that it recoils at the threat of an impending critique, it ceases to be a democracy. In that instant, one result is that it becomes an empire or, as Ferguson would have it, it gains the confidence of an imperial conscience. However, it is crucial to consider that another possible result is that it could become an empire with a *bad conscience*; that is, it could conduct itself as an empire while constructing a democratic veneer to mollify its moral sensibility. The latter, I would argue, is the more dangerous outcome, and is the only sense that can be made of the neologism ‘ne imperialism’. Stacking the global-political deck by way inventive appellations and polemical trickery, averting risk and responsibility at every turn, neoimperialism is a much worse risk for any democracy, for it poses the danger of a false security. The 19th century imperialist Cecil Rhodes defined colonialism as ‘philanthropy plus 5%’; American neoimperialists hold to Rhodes’ euphemism too well, as they continue to tack on military supplements to their purported altruism. To combat the ‘new’ imperialism, it is necessary to recognize what is new in it, to resist simply leveling the old charges against the old imperialism. Anti-neo-imperialist political strategy, *s’il en y a*, must insist on the priority of loosening our secure hold on security and, hence, running the risks of a democracy again.

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Notes

1. Jacques Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship*, trans. George Collins (New York: Verso, 1997) 105.
2. Niall Ferguson, “The Empire Slinks Back: Why Americans Don’t Really Have What It Takes To Rule The World,” *New York Times Magazine* (27 April, 2003) 54. Ferguson is the Hertzog professor of financial history at the Stern School of Business, New York University, and a senior research fellow of Jesus College, Oxford.
3. See the Spring 2003 issue of *The National Interest*, which Ferguson claims is “practically an

- American Empire Special Edition.” Ferguson, “The Empire Slinks Back” 54.
4. Ferguson, “The Empire Slinks Back” 54.
 5. Ferguson, “The Empire Slinks Back” 52.
 6. President George Walker Bush, “Address to the Iraqi People,” (10 April, 2003.) The full text of this and all other of President Bush’s speeches cited herein are available on the White House website <<http://www.whitehouse.gov>>.
 7. Ferguson, “The Empire Slinks Back” 54.
 8. Of course, it could be argued that going to war in Afghanistan and Iraq was, in fact, a risky endeavor. Certainly the current numbers of U.S. casualties would attest to the risk. However, as a *strategic* decision, it is crucial to note that the overwhelming resources and might of U.S. military power, measured against the Iraqi and Afghani resistance, secured any *military* risk in advance (that is, there was little to no possibility of the U.S. risking a military defeat). The real risk involved in these wars is found in the context of the post-war occupations, which in both cases is a risk that the U.S. is explicitly unwilling to undertake as a long-term project. This is, in part, Ferguson’s criticism as well.
 9. Ferguson, “The Empire Slinks Back” 55.
 10. Ferguson, “The Empire Slinks Back” 56.
 11. Ferguson, “The Empire Slinks Back” 57.
 12. Ferguson, “The Empire Slinks Back” 55.
 13. Ferguson, “The Empire Slinks Back” 54.
 14. President George Walker Bush, “State of the Union Address” (29 January, 2002).
 15. Jürgen Habermas, “Faith and Knowledge—An Opening,” trans. Kermit Snelson (14 October, 2001) <<http://www.sueddeutsche.de/aktuell/sz/artikel186740.php>>.
 16. President George Walker Bush, “State of the Union Address” (29 January, 2002).
 17. President George Walker Bush, “State of the Union Address” (28 January, 2003).
 18. President George Walker Bush, “State of the Union Address” (28 January 2003).
 19. Ferguson, “The Empire Slinks Back” 54.,
 20. Said, Edward. “Islam and The West Are Inadequate Banners,” *The Observer* (16 September, 2001).
 21. Arundhati Roy. “The Algebra of Infinite Justice,” *The Guardian* (29 September, 2001).
 22. See Jean-François Lyotard and Jean-Loup Thébaud, *Just Gaming*, trans. Wlad Godzich (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1985).
 23. The most telling example of this practice is the designation of Iraq, Iran, and North Korea as the ‘axis of evil’. However, it is important to note that sometimes the names bestowed are also explicitly *false*, as we have learned was the case with the designation of Iraq as an “imminent threat” to United States’ security.
 24. Eqbal Ahmed, Eqbal, “What’s In A Name?,” *Eqbal Ahmed Archive, Khuldunia On-Line: Religion and Politics*, <http://www.geocities.com/CollegePark/Library/9803/eqbal_ahmad/whats_in_a_name.html>.
 25. Ahmed, “What’s In A Name?”
 26. David Rieff, “Beware Wars of Altruism,” *The Wall Street Journal* (10 July, 2003).
 27. It is beyond the scope of this paper to offer a serious philosophical reflection on the concept of ‘risk’, though such work is part of my larger project and, I believe, essential to considerations of neoimperialism.
 28. Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship* 306.
 29. Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship* 105.

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