



## **Empire, Imperialism, the United States and Australia**

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“I am fundamentally in favour of empire. Indeed, I believe that empire is more necessary in the twenty-first century than ever before.”

Niall Ferguson, *Colossus: The Price of America's Empire*

Having seemingly disappeared from the lexicon of the left during the 1990s, displaced by globalisation, the term imperialism has resurfaced in the new millennium. The renewed interest in the term and in matters of empire and imperialism came in large part from a bellicose Bush Government, determined to project United States military power in the wake of the September 11 attacks in 2001. It is instructive to note that the rhetoric that accompanied Bush Senior's military intervention in Kuwait and Iraq in 1991 was about constructing a 'New World Order'. With Bush Junior's campaigns the rhetoric shifted from 'Weapons of Mass Destruction' to countering terrorism in the form of Al Qaeda. Increasingly though, through the mists of official discourse and punditry, the shadowy figure of empire emerged. The shift from a 'New World Order' that suggested some form of multilateralism, albeit with the US as first amongst equals, to increasingly more insistent calls for the adoption of a more unilateral approach in the international arena, possibly as an imperial power, marks a real change in US political discourse. Officially, for much of the twentieth century, US governments eschewed empire and imperialism, apart from one brief pro-imperial phase connected with the Presidency of Theodore Roosevelt, which resulted in the extrication by force of Cuba and the Philippines from Spanish tutelage. Within the last few years, voices from the right have been heard calling for a re-appraisal of the notion of empire by US political elites. One example of such an empire proponent is Niall Ferguson, the British historian now resident in the US. He has argued that the mantle of empire, once carried so responsibly by Great Britain in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, should now be assumed unashamedly by America in the twenty-first.

The conceptualising of empire and imperialism by people like Ferguson tends to romanticise a rather harsh set of circumstances for many countries that are lower down the hierarchy of nation-states. Australia has, since European settlement, accommodated itself to empires and imperial projects. Such accommodation has left a mixed legacy. For indigenous Australians contact with the British Empire was to have profound and lasting consequences. Those of European ancestry have experienced both benefits and costs. One

of the benefits has been the security that comes with a close relationship with a world power. Both Great Britain and the US were and are possessors of extensive military forces. Perhaps the most obvious costs have been the number of Australians killed and maimed in conflicts like the South African War (Boer War), the First and Second World Wars, Korea, Malaysia, Vietnam and more recently Afghanistan. Over the last half of the twentieth century there has been less overt enthusiasm for sending Australian troops overseas in support of the great and the good. This is reflected in the declining numbers of troops actually sent to overseas sites of conflict. Notwithstanding the drop in troop numbers, Australian governments and the major political parties always have sought to integrate Australian foreign policy into the geopolitical strategies of two dominant powers: Great Britain and the US. Simply put, the cornerstone of Australian foreign policy has been and remains a commitment to empire and imperialism. Manifestations of this can be seen in the rapidity with which new prime ministers and Opposition leaders eagerly embrace and acclaim the ANZUS Treaty and /or have an audience with the US ambassador. It is a safe bet to assume that whichever leader of the major political parties attains prime ministerial office after the August election, either Julia Gillard or Tony Abbott, there will be official affirmation that Australia will uphold its position as a friend, ally and treaty partner with the US.

The historical record shows what the consequences have been for Australia and Australians when a foreign policy based on subordination to powerful states is its centrepiece. Involvement in Afghanistan, which appears to be an ongoing and unwinnable conflict, is the latest example. Given the constraints of bi-partisan support for the ANZUS Treaty it would be wishful thinking to suggest that there will be a re-assessment of Australia's problematic relationship with empire and imperialism in its current US-led incarnation. Perhaps now, however, is the optimum time to adopt a more critical approach to Australia's engagement with imperial projects as a necessary precondition for the development of a more independent and less subordinate foreign policy. Niall Ferguson, in a recent address in Australia, sounded an ominous note of caution about empires. Highlighting that empires are subject to decline and fall, and that the decline of the Ottoman and the British Empires were precipitated by fiscal crises, he pointed out that the US currently is "on a completely unsustainable fiscal course", which in turn had "profound implications not only for the United States, but also for all countries that have come to rely on it, directly or indirectly, for their security". (*The Age* 29 July 2009) From the mouth of an unabashed empire enthusiast this is quite a warning. Australians would do well to heed it.

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