

# The New Criterion

## Books

March 2005

### Misplaced guilt

by [Andrew Roberts](#)

*A review of In Praise of Empires: Globalization and Order, by Deepak Lal.*

*Deepak Lal*

In Praise of Empires:

Globalization and Order.

Palgrave Macmillan, 306 pages, \$26.95

The Italians are rightly proud of Ancient Rome, the French revere the Napoleonic First Empire, the Portuguese esteem Prince Henry the Navigator as highly as the Austrians do Emperor Charles V, or the Spanish King Philip II. You won't find a Russian who denigrates Peter or Catherine the Great, any more than a Greek who despises the Athens of Pericles. In Uzbekistan the highest order of chivalry is the Order of Temur, named after their all-conquering hero Tamerlane, and—despite decades of official disapproval—Mongolians still toast the memory of the great Genghis Khan. Indeed, there is no country or race that is expected to feel guilty about the moment their empire occupied the limelight of History—except of course the English-speaking peoples.

For us, the fact that first the British and then the American hegemonies have held global sway since the Industrial Revolution is regarded to be the source of profound, permanent, and self-evident guilt. Ever since the 1960s the academy, the Left-liberal intelligentsia, and the political establishments across the English-speaking worlds have been united in this central mantra: Imperialism equals Evil.

Rare is it that an academic economist writes a book that bears the reader along effortlessly, rarer still that it should be genuinely inspiring, but Deepak Lal has achieved both in this scholarly, witty, and brave work debunking such a credo. It should become—but owing to the superb title shall never be—required reading for everyone at the State Department. More realistically it ought to be given shelf space in the libraries of all who reject the idea that we should apologize for the British and American empires.

The nephew of a Nehru cabinet minister who was imprisoned by the British, Deepak Lal is a former Indian foreign service diplomat, Oxford economics don, research administrator for the World Bank, and the author of nineteen books. Professor Lal has advised governments, travelled extensively, and is now the highly respected professor of international development studies at UCLA. He began life believing in the socialist and nationalist ideologies of post-independence India, but now despises what he calls “the Dirigiste Dogma.” In short, it is impossible to imagine anyone in a better position to explode the Imperialism=Evil myth from the inside.

“It is evidence and experience,” Lal says, “especially in working and travelling in most parts of the Third World during my professional career, which have led me to change my earlier views.” In only

216 pages of tautly written, sharply worded, and frankly exhilarating text, Lal sets out the case for imperialism in the modern world, and why the United States could bring untold benefits to the planet if only it could shrug off the Revolutionary War-era notion that empires are bad things per se. If they're done right, empires can bring the widespread and long-term peace and prosperity that the post-1648 Westphalian system of constantly competing nation states has been historically incapable of delivering.

Seeing a group campaigning under the banner "Vegan Dykes Against the WTO" in Seattle in November 1999 set Lal thinking about globalization, just as decades earlier during the Vietnam War he had been set thinking about imperialism by the sight of a black U.S. captain reciting Rudyard Kipling's "White Man's Burden" in Delhi. The product of the fusion of these two concepts—globalization and imperialism—is a book that ought radically to alter the popular (presently negative) view of both. "The order provided by empires," Lal argues, "has been essential for the working of the benign processes of globalization, which promote prosperity."

This splendidly bald and wonderfully revisionist statement is supported by a wealth of evidence and acutely chosen statistical tables, backed up by an impressive range of sources from fellow intellectuals. Drawing on the thought of Raymond Aron, Hedley Bull, Niall Ferguson, Michael Oakeshott, and many others, Lal nonetheless constructs his own analysis of where we've been, where we're headed, and what might happen if we choose not to go there. This book is a signpost saying "Stop! Think!," and as such it does for American geopolitics what Charles Murray's *Human Accomplishment* did for Western self-respect and Allan Bloom's *Closing of the American Mind* tried to do for higher education.

Lal defines his terms carefully: "Globalization is the process of creating a common economic space which leads to a growing integration of the world economy through increasingly free movement of goods, capital, and labour," something that he believes is almost always "a positive sum game." America can choose to go down the route of free trade and laissez-faire, thereby enriching the world as well as itself, or it can stick with the New Deal-era populist anti-trust legislation and trade reciprocity that Lal believes impoverishes both the world and the United States.

"Not since the fall of the Roman Empire has there been a potential imperial power like the U.S. today," Lal states, and the role that has been thrust upon her by History, one that she must not now shirk, is to create what he calls a "LIEO," a Liberal International Economic Order. The major attributes of the nineteenth-century British-imposed LIEO were free trade, free mobility of capital, sound money due to the gold standard, property rights guaranteed by law, piracy-free transportation thanks to the Royal Navy, political stability, low domestic taxation and spending, and "gentlemanly" capitalism run from the City of London. "Despite Marxist and nationalist cant," he writes, the British empire delivered astonishing growth rates, at least to those places fortunate enough to be colored pink on the globe.

This first LIEO was the first truly global economic system, and was immeasurably aided by the plunging costs resulting from the inventions of railways, telegraphy, and steam engines. Yet it faltered after the Great War when Britain became unable, and the U.S. was unwilling, to continue to impose it. The great villains of this book are the (now largely unknown) British Prime Minister Andrew Bonar Law, who declared in 1922 that Britain could no longer be the world's policeman, and President Woodrow Wilson whose "utopian world view was a strange mixture of classical liberalism, Burkean conservatism, Presbyterianism, and socialism." Lal also blames Wilson's vandalism of the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman empires in 1919 for creating the circumstances that allowed the rise of Hitler.

"If the Americans had [in the 1870s] joined the British in creating an Anglo-American imperium to maintain the Pax," postulates Lal in a fascinating historical counterfactual,

the terrible events of the last century could perhaps have been avoided. The joint industrial and military might of an Anglo-American imperium run, let us say, by the equivalent of a Lord Palmerston, could have prevented the Kaiser's gamble to achieve mastery in Europe, and one of the most pointless wars—the First World War—could perhaps have been avoided.

For all that, Lal accepts the Hobbesian view that “fighting and violence are endemic to human nature,” and his subsequent potted history of imperialism over the past two millennia is as cogent as it is persuasive. In the ancient empires of the Tigris and Euphrates it was largely threats from outside—from the nomads of the northern steppes and southern deserts—that forced communities to coalesce into empires. Lal is at pains to emphasize the essentially *defensive* nature of many empires, although of course not those of the Nazi and Marxist-Leninist totalitarian states of the twentieth century. In those, Mankind was forced down two cul de sacs which both led only to abattoirs, and from which it did not fully emerge for seventy-two years after 1917.

Once Pax Britannica ruled the seas and Pax Americana controlled the skies, outside threats were containable, yet still they came—from the Kaiser, the Nazis, Soviet Communism, and now from Islamic fundamentalist terrorism. Lal argues convincingly that the envy and hatred of what Kipling called the “lesser breeds without [i.e., outside] the law” is simply the inevitable concomitant of greatness. America should ignore these and concentrate on winning the historical applause of Mankind (a politically incorrect word of which he pleasingly defends the use, incidentally).

What cannot protect the English-speaking peoples is what Lal describes as “mythical international civil society,” least of all a strengthened United Nations. The United Nations after 1945 has made every error that the League of Nations did before 1939. “Once again,” as Lal perceptively puts it, “the anthropomorphic identification of states as persons, and the presumption of an essential harmony of interests between these equal world citizens was proclaimed, with those breaking international norms being brought into line through collective economic sanctions.” His contempt for these as effective instruments of policy is unbounded.

“With the demeaning behavior demanded of the United Nations to try to get the Iraq resolution through in early 2003 by trying to outbid the French to get the vote of Cameroon on the UN Security Council,” states Lal, “no self-respecting power and certainly not one as powerful as the United States should, or is likely to, put up with this remnant of the old international order.” How many Americans and yankophile non-Americans will cheer that splendid statement, as well as his conclusion that “there is a case for closing down many of the multilateral institutions that were created to manage a very different world at a time when the United States was unwilling openly to embrace the burden of empire.”

Empires promote modernity, Lal argues, yet in the American academy they are persistently seen as outmoded, by professors whose own outdated studies have left them in thrall to the anarchical post-Westphalian international system of competing nation states. Lal's own exposition of Realpolitik is so eye-wateringly unapologetic that at times he makes Henry Kissinger look like a moralizing liberal.

Of course in such a wide-ranging book covering such profound issues, occasionally some generalizations and misconceptions must creep in. This (British) reviewer took exception to Lal's claim that “nationalist revolts” destroyed the British empire in India, whereas in fact it was the Labour party's ideological and finance-driven decision in London, rather than any problem with civil disobedience in India, that led them to quit the sub-continent in 1947. This quibble apart, Lal's analyses are otherwise as factually correct as they are refreshingly politically incorrect.

What can America now do to promote the imperial role that, largely unsought, has been thrust upon

her by destiny? One useful long-term aim, which will contravene over half a century of devout State Department practice, would be to foil, or at least retard, the drive for the European Union to become a competing superstate. As Lal rightly points out: “It must be in the interest of the United States to see that a politically united Europe does not emerge ... [but] ... to see Europe remain a congeries of independent states, happy, as in the past, to be free riders in the world order maintained by the U.S. imperium.” Here is real, rare, and remarkable wisdom, which the State Department is busily ignoring.

To invert Dean Acheson’s famous quip about post-Suez Britain, America has found an empire but has yet to find a role. Republicans and Democrats both shun the term “empire” as profoundly un-American, despite it representing a far higher historic calling than the merely nation-based one of 1776. Lal rejects the neoconservative project of extending democracy throughout the globe, arguing that experience shows that in places like Iran and Algeria it will be used to promote Islamic nihilism and obscurantism. For him modernity is the touchstone, and the perfect way for America both to defeat al Qaeda and to earn the enduring salute of History. Imperialism is thus an idea whose time has come again.

**Andrew Roberts** is the author of *A History of the English-Speaking Peoples since 1900* (Harper Collins).

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This article originally appeared in *The New Criterion*, Volume 23 March 2005, on page 68

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