

## America abroad : U.S. may not be imperial, but it does have an empire

By Kal Raustiala International Herald Tribune

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The occupation of Iraq has led some to proclaim the birth of a new American empire. The Bush administration steadfastly claims the United States has no imperial intentions.

"America has never been an empire," George W. Bush said in the 2000 presidential campaign. "We may be the only great power in history that had the chance and refused, preferring greatness to power and justice to glory."

The president was wrong. At one time the United States ruled quite a large empire. And there is still an American empire today.

While our empire is small, its significance, for our democratic values, is not. With talk of empire in the air, it is time we acknowledged our largely forgotten imperial legacy.

Let's start with the Spanish-American war. The United States acquired Puerto Rico, along with the Philippines and Guam. The 19th century was a high point in the history of imperialism. Many in the United States believed that to be a great power, America needed an empire, just like those possessed by Britain and France. The handover of Spain's colonies provided an instant empire.

There was concern about reconciling these new possessions with our democratic tradition. Were the natives now American citizens? Did the constitution apply to these new lands?

These were burning political questions at the time. So burning, in fact, that in the 1900 presidential election, the Democratic platform prominently declared that "the Constitution follows the flag."

Over the 20th century our empire waxed and waned. It shrank when we granted the Philippines independence in 1946. It grew when we acquired the Virgin Islands, American Samoa, and, in the 1970s, the Northern Marianas Islands. Altogether, our tropical possessions are small: the total population is under 5 million.

How does the United States rule its colonies? As a constitutional matter, and as a matter of U.S. policy, the federal government is completely supreme in the colonies. In American Samoa, the residents are not even citizens of the United States, only U.S. "nationals" — a euphemistic phrase for subjects.

In the other colonies the residents are American citizens, but decidedly second-class. They do not vote for president. They do not have voting representation in Congress. And they do not enjoy the full protections of the U.S. Constitution. While they enjoy significant autonomy, that autonomy is subject to the will of Congress and can be revoked at any time.

Our nation was founded on the principle that governments "derive their just powers from the consent of the governed." Yet the residents of U.S. colonies have no democratic say in the government that ultimately rules them.

To be sure, these possessions enjoy many advantages through their association with the United States. That is why independence has never commanded widespread support. That fact, however,

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does not justify poor treatment, or in any way negate their status as colonies.

For the United States to live up to its core ideals — democracy, justice, equality — we must reconsider the place of these colonies in our political system. Statehood, for example, may be justified for Puerto Rico. At a minimum, all residents of our colonies ought to be made U.S. citizens and all ought to enjoy some level of real representation in Washington.

For all the talk about empire, it seems clear the United States has no real imperial ambitions in the Middle East. That fact is one of the things that make the United States a benevolent superpower — as the president rightly suggested some years ago, the most benevolent the world has ever known.

Our lack of imperial ambitions today, however, has not kept us from maintaining an empire. In light of the nation we have become, we must frankly acknowledge our forgotten empire and revamp our policies toward it.

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